1

# Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture

STEVEN T. KATZ

## A Review of the Extant Literature

A review of the extant scholarly literature on mysticism—which ranges from William James's classic, pioneering work at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the studies of Evelyn Underhill, Rufus Jones, Baron Von Hugel, and Rufus Jones, to the near-contemporary and contemporary investigations of Walter T. Stace, R. C. Zaehner, Frits Staal, Ninian Smart, Nelson Pike, William Wainwright, Huston Smith, and Wayne Proudfoot (to name only the more prominent figures)—would reveal a nearly uniform neglect of the significance of sacred scriptures in the descriptive studies and the analytic discussions of these works. This neglect is in no way surprising, given the general conceptual and interpretive tendencies that have governed the study of this subject. That is, mysticism—and, more especially, mystical experience—has been, and in many quarters still is, presented as an essentially individualistic, acultural, ahistorical, asocial, acontextual, anomian (if not primarily antinomian) phenomenon. As such, its decisive characteristics are said to be its individuality, its spontaneity, and its transcending of prevailing cultural, intellectual, social, and theological norms and influences, whatever they happen to be. Accordingly, Hindu mystics are said to transcend the Hindu context, just as Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist adepts, and those emerging from still other religious traditions and communities, are said to transcend theirs. Among the normative cultural and religious realia that are disregarded in the scholarly analysis of the mystical experience is the prevailing scriptural tradition out of which the mystical personality has emerged. In consequence, Eckhart's, Tauler's, and Suso's thoughts and experiences are understood as being intelligible apart from the New Testament. Shankara's nondualism is dissociated from the Vedas; Abraham Abulafia's and Isaac Luria's teachings are disconnected from the Torah; Ibn

ʿArabī's and Rūmī's theosophical reflections are analyzed independently of the saturating influence of the Qurʾān, with additional "examples" of dissociation being putatively provided by all the major mystical traditions. Of course, many scholars continue to fall back on simplistic explanations of the postexperiential usage by mystics of the particularistic languages of Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, respectively, but this relationship is seen as relevant only in terms of the postexperiential need to find a usable language in which to report their experience.

But this widely held explanatory paradigm, this highly influential and broadly repercussive decipherment, is, at its worst, misleading and conceptually crude, and, at best, deficient, defective, and misrepresentative. The role of scripture, contrary to much scholarly opinion, is essential to the major mystical traditions and to the teachings and experience(s) of their leading representatives. And because it is, I attempt to explain in this essay, consistent with my previously developed contextualist reading of mystical experience and mystical sources,[1] how this seminal connection has functioned during the history of mysticism across traditions and why the failure to appreciate its correct value and inescapable significance leads to a mistaken morphological and phenomenological deconstruction of the relevant literary and experiential data.

The most direct evidence of this deep mystical connection to and inextricable engagement with scripture is the literature produced by the major mystical traditions themselves. This literature is not, as one might infer from scholarly studies on the subject of mysticism, primarily about an independent and individual religious experience but is, rather, more often than not, composed of esoteric commentaries on canonical texts. Without much effort one can identify, in supporting this essential claim, the following major works that have been created by the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist mystical traditions.

## *Jewish Mystical Sources*

The mystical compositions of the rabbinic era are based primarily on the elusive passages in the Bible that are connected with the creation of the world (that is, in the book of Genesis), Moses' various theophanies, the vision(s) of Isaiah, the Song of Songs, and the extraordinary vision of the chariot (*merkavah*) in chapter 1 of Ezekiel. Commenting on these passages, the sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud produced the sources on the so-called *heikalot* (palaces) and the *merkavah*, and related material. Included here are the *Heichalot Rabbati*, the *Heichalot Zutarti*, and the *Sefer Heichalot*, all of which contain material on the ascent to the heavenly palaces; the *Shiur Komah*, which develops themes first articulated in the Song of Songs; and the widely influential *Sefer Yezirah*, which is best understood as a commentary on the mechanics of creation (stated all too skimpily in Genesis 1), as is the less well known *Seder Rabba de-Bereshit*. Medieval Kabbalah, beginning with the *Sefer ha-Bahir* and the *Iyyun* circle of Rabbi Isaac the Blind (c. 1160–1235), produced a now lost commentary on the "taamei ha-mitzvot" (the reasons for the commandments of the Torah) and a commentary on *Sefer Yezirah* that was in effect a supercommentary on Genesis. Ezra ben Shlomo of Gerona (d.c. 1245) composed a kabbalistic commentary on the Song of Songs (it was erroneously attributed, in most sources, to Nahmanides); Azriel ben Menachem of Gerona (early thirteenth century), authored *Commentary on the*

*Aggadot*—that is, in effect, an esoteric commentary on the Torah; and Jacob ben Sheshet (mid-thirteenth century), intended his *Ha-Emunah ve-ha Bitachon* and his *Meshiv Devarim Nekhochim* as kabbalistic exegeses of the Torah. The diverse compositions of Isaac of Acre—especially his *Me'irot Eynayim*; Menachem Recanati's *Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot* and *Commentary on the Torah*; Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'arei Orah* (and other works); and Joseph of Hamadan's *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot*—all belong to the genre of commentary, understood broadly. The greatest of all medieval Jewish centers, in Spain, produced Nahmanides' *Commentary on the Torah*, which, next to Rashi's commentary, was the most influential of all medieval Jewish exegetical works. And above all, the Zohar, the preeminent Jewish mystical work, presented itself in the form of a commentary on the Torah. In turn, a large number of supercommentaries on the Zohar appeared, the most famous and influential of which was written by Moses Cordovero, the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist from Safed. But enough—the quality and quantity of the sources already cited here are such that one need not continue to list major and minor additions to this inventory from the late medieval period, from the school of Lurianic Kabbalah in the sixteenth century, and from the Hasidic community that emerged in the late eighteenth century, in order to conclude that the history of Kabbalah is, in a fundamental and dynamic way, a history of esoteric biblical exegesis.

### *Christian Mystical Sources*

The Christian mystical tradition, developed primarily but not exclusively out of the Pauline corpus—including Paul's own mystical ascent to the "third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2–4)—the Gospel of John, and the same set of biblical passages that were so influential among the talmudic sages, drawn from Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, the Song of Songs, and Ezekiel. The patristic era had already seen such seminal and influential works as Basil of Caesarea's (fourth century) *Hexaëmeron*, on the story of creation in Genesis; Gregory of Nyssa's (fourth century) *De Vita Moysis* and his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*; John Chrysostom's (fourth century and early fifth century) *Homilies on Paul's Epistles*; Hilary of Poitiers's (fourth century) *Homilies on Psalms*; Ambrose's (fourth century) *De Abraham* and his *Hexaëmeron*; Origen's vast corpus of biblical commentaries; the Pseudo-Dionysius's (late fifth–early sixth century) comments on the names of God in his *The Divine Names*, and on Moses' ascent in *The Mystical Theology*; and Gregory the Great's (540–604) *Moralia on Job*, *Commentary on 1 Kings*, *Homilies on* Ezekiel, and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. This commentarial tradition then vigorously continued into the medieval era. The major works that serve simultaneously as the biblical commentaries and building blocks of the great medieval Christian mystical tradition include John Scotus Erigena's two commentaries on John, his *Periphyseon*, and his *Commentary on Genesis*; Bernard of Clairvaux's twelfth-century *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and his *Exposition of Romans*; William of St. Thierry's (twelfth century) *Exposition of the Song of Songs*; John of Ford's (late twelfth–early thirteenth century) *Commentary on the Song of Songs*; Rupert of Duetz's (twelfth century) commentary on Matthew, called *The Glory and Honor of the Son of Man*; and Hugh of St. Victor's (twelfth century) many biblical commentaries, especially those on Noah's ark—*De archa Noe morali* and *De archa Noe*

*mystica*. Other major works include Richard of St. Victor's (twelfth century) *The Mystical Ark*, which deals with various themes in Genesis and other biblical books; Gilbert of Hoyland's (twelfth century) *Commentary on the Song of Songs*; Eckhart's (late twelfth century and early thirteenth century) *Commentaries on Genesis* (as well as on other biblical texts), and his German sermons on biblical themes; many of Johannes Tauler's (fourteenth century) sermons on biblical topics and verses; and Jacob Boehme's early-seventeenth-century *Mysterium Magnum*, which is a commentary on Genesis. Here I do not cite the many lives of Jesus and related works—for example, Julian of Norwich's (fourteenth century) *Showings*; Thomas a. Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* (fifteenth century); the highly influential sermons of Bernardine of Siena (fifteenth century); the anonymous fifteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ*; or those many treatises that concentrate on the life of Mary. Nor do I introduce the role of the mystical interpretation of the Bible in the religious reform movements and the controversies that occupied so central a place in the history of the late medieval church from the time of Wycliffe to the Reformation.

### *Sufi Mystical Sources*

Among Sufis, the Qurʾān is the work around which all speculation, teaching, and experience revolve, and the experience of the Prophet is the paradigmatic "mystical" moment. Indeed, as Sahl ibn-Adullāh al-Tustarī announced, "All ecstacy is vain if it is not witnessed by the Qurʾān and the Prophetic example."[2] At the same time, Sarrāj emphasized, "Allah most high taught us that Allah's love for the believers, and the believer's love for Allah, lies in following His messenger."[3] In consequence, Sufis, over the centuries, were continuously and consistently preoccupied with the production of commentaries on the Qurʾān. Among the most important writers included in this genre are the following, along with the titles of their classic works: Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765), *Tafsīr al*-Qurʾān; Muhammed Sahl ibn ʻAbdullāh at-Tustarī (d. 896), *Tafsīr al*-Qurʾān; Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (825–910), *Rasā'il*; Husayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), *Kitab al-fawāsīn*, a mystical commentary on sura 27, dealing with Allah's power and majesty; Abū Naṣr Abdullāh bin Ali al-Sarrāj al Ṭusī (d. 988), *Kitāb al-Luma fi't Taṣawwuf*; ʻAbdu'r Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 1021), *Haqa'iq al-Tafsīr*, an allegorical reading of the Qurʾān; and Ali ibn ʻUthmān al Hujwīrī (d. 1076), *Kashf al-maḥjūb*. Other Sufi writings include Abdullah-i Ansari's (1006–1089) highly influential but uncompleted *Tafsīr*, which eventually led to a significant Persian commentary on the Qurʾān, written by his student Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (d. 1126) and known as "The Unveiling of Secrets" (*Kashf al-asrār*); Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥȳa Suhrawardī's (1153–1191) more than fifty works, many of which are allegorical commentaries on the Qurʾān, the most famous of which, *Ḥikmāt al-ishrāq*, provides a critique of Aristotelian philosophy and a plea for unitive mystical experience (based again on sura 24:35); Abu al-Qushayrī' (d. 1072), *al Rasā'ul al Qushayriyya* (explains Qurʾānic terminology and Sufi expressions predicated on this foundation); *Ar-risāla fi ilm al-tassawuf* and *Kitab al mi'rāj* (on Muhammed's mystical ascent, cited in sura 17:1), and a running Sufi commentary on the Qurʾān, entitled *Laṭā' if al-ishārāt* (The subtle Quranic allusions); Abū Ḥāmid Al Ghazzālī (d. 1111), *Mishkāt al Anwār* (The niche of lights), a commentary based largely on sura 24:35, the so-called light verse: "Allah

is the light of Heaven and the earth. . . . It is light upon light. Allah guides by His light those whom He wishes; Allah speaks to humanity in similitudes; Allah is knowing with all things"; Ibn ʿArabī's (d. 1240) vast corpus that is continually engaged in commentary and almost always relates itself to the Qurʾān; Ruzbihān Baqlī's (d. 1209) annotated collections of Ḥallāj's teachings, including, especially, his *Shar-i shaṭḥiyāt*, which seeks to gather together and explain the paradoxical comments on Hallaj on the Qurʾān and on other matters and to explain his own gnostic commentary *'Arā'is al-bayān* (The brides of elucidation); 'Abd ar Razzāq al-Kāshānī's (d. 1330) *Tafsīr* (mistakenly attributed to Ibn 'Arabī, al-Kāshānī's teacher, and therefore usually known as *Tafsīr al-Shaykh al-Akbar*); the work of Shādhilī shaykh, Ibn 'Ata' Allah al-Iskandari (d. 1309), *Laṭā'f al-minan*; the gnostic theosophical work of Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640); Ismā'il Haqqi's (d. 1715) *Ruḥ al-bayan fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān*; and Shihab al-Din al-Alusi's (d. 1854) *Ruḥ al ma'ani fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-'azim wa'l-sab 'al-mathāni*. All of these sources can and should be identified as belonging to a central and unbroken esoteric exegetical tradition.

In addition, the many works that praise Muhammad represent a complementary form of Qurʾānic teaching. Like Christian mystical narratives based on the life of Jesus, and later those on the life and person of Mary, Muhammad's external acts and inherent personal qualities, as revealed in the Qurʾān and hadith, become models for subsequent Sufi hopes and aspirations. So, for example, Bāyazīd Basṭami (d. 874), Rūzbihān Baqli, and Ibn ʿArabī's diverse teachings on the ascent to heaven—as well as their own experiences of ascent—are, in effect, commentaries on Muhammad's *miraj* (sura 17:1).

### *Hindu Mystical Sources*

In the Hindu tradition—with its powerful sense of rootedness in the Vedas, and then the Upaniṣads that are traditionally held to be the concluding section of Vedas, and its authentic manifestation of *Vāk*, the eternal word—commentarial activity, the exegesis of the canonical texts, is an ancient and fundamental endeavor broadly categorized as Mīmāṃṣa and Pūrva Mīmāṃṣa. In turn, Pūrva Mīmāṃṣa is integrally related to the study of grammar (*vyākarana*),[4] and of logic (*nyāya*), two additional disciplines required for the serious study of scripture. Understood as constituting a spiritual discipline, exegetical effort and Vedic study (*svādhyāya*) are means of gaining insight into and ways of accessing the gnostic truths at the core of the original revelation(s). As such, they are intellectual-spiritual procedures of estimable weight that, not surprisingly, have spawned an enormous corpus. One could, and should, count the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, and Purāṇas as commentaries on the Vedas and Upaniṣads, in a way that is somewhat analogous to seeing the later books of the Bible as inner-biblical commentaries on the Torah. Beyond these canonical documents one may well begin the summary of the explicitly commentarial literature with the following: Jaimini's work on the Vedas, especially his (Pūrva) Mīmāmsā Sūtras; the shadowy Upavarsa's (circa 100 B.C.E. to 200 B.C.E.) lost Mīmāṃṣa and Brahma Sūtra commentaries; and the commentaries of Sabara, Kumarila, and Prabhakara. Then there is the massive exegetical literature of the Advaitans that began with Gauḍapāda's Kārikās on the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (late seventh century to early eighth century C.E.), and that reached its apotheosis in the many towering works of

Śaṅkara[5] (eighth century C.E.), on nearly all the major canonical texts of the Hindu tradition. Śaṅkara's works came to have authoritative value for the entire later Advaitan (as well as larger Indian) tradition, and this continued in the substantive studies of his four main disciples—Mandana Misra (eighth century), author of the *Brahṁasiddhī*; Padmapāda (eighth century), author of the *Pañcapādika*; Sureśvara (eighth century), author of such commentaries as the *Brahadāraṇyakopaniṣadbhāsya-vārttika* and the *Taittirīyopaniṣadbhāsyavārttika*; and Toṭaka (eighth century), author of the *'Srutisārasamud-dharma*.[6]

As a complement to this consequential Advaitan creativity, the vast tradition of bhakti Vaiṣṇavite commentaries began flowing, in the first instance, from the work of Rāmānuja (eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E.). Rāmānuja was the author of several commentaries on the Vedānta Sūtra, including his well-known *Sribhāṣya*, his *Vedāntadīpa*, and his *Vedāntasāra*, as well as commentaries on the Bhagavad Gītā, and on the Vedas, including his celebrated *Vedārthasamgraha*. Following Rāmānuja's lead, one should recognize the important work of his disciple, Tirukkuruhai Piḷḷān (Kurukeśa), author of a commentary on Nammāḻvar's Tiruvāymoli, and Viṣṇu Citta's commentary on the Viṣṇu Purāṇa.[7] Two generations after Rāmānuja, and emerging from within the Śri Vaiṣṇava camp, we note Parā'sara Bhaṭṭar's *Visnusahasranāma*.[8] And from this point on, the Vaiṣṇavite tradition continued to produce significant works of basic commentary. Note also the different, but material, perspective represented by Srikantha's eighth-century *Śaiva* commentary on the Brama Sūtra; Madhva's thirteenth-century commentaries on the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Gītā, and the Vaiṣnava-Āgamas, such as his *Brahmasūtrabhāsya*, his *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāsya*, his *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Bhāsya*, his *Gītābhāsya*, and his *Gītātat Paryanirnaya*; and the commentaries of Sāyana on the Vedas. This listing of significant Hindu mystical commentaries from the medieval era to our own could be extended almost indefinitely, for the exegetical and reflective achievements mentioned are, in fact, a very small segment of the major mystical commentaries produced within this tradition.

### *Buddhist Mystical Sources*

Buddhism, too, has a rich, internally important exegetical tradition. Moving away from the Suttapiṭaka, which is probably the earliest record of the Buddha's teaching and was compiled by the First Buddhist Council at Rājagrha[9] (following the Buddha's death on the testimony of the Buddha's closest disciples), the dharma has continued to grow and to be lived through the channels of commentary and explanation. The different schools of Buddhist interpretation that arose after the Buddha gained *pari-nirvāṇa*—Mahāyāna, Theravāda, Hīnayāna—and the arguments about doctrine that divided them, required theological and logical defenses that were based on construals of the first, unimpeachable layers of accepted teaching. This meant settling on certain understandings, and not others, of the Abhidharmapiṭaka, and then of the Mahāvibhāṣā. Like early Christian debates about the person of Christ, or the meaning of the crucifixion, or the mystery of the Mass, Buddhists argued over, and gave competing explications to, doctrines like dependent origination (*pratitya samutpada*), the denial of selfhood (*anātman*), the nature of the dharma, the character of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and the

meaning of *nirvāṇa*. Given the nature of these disputes, they could be settled only by arguments based in large measure on the exegesis—or what was claimed to be the exegesis—of the accepted canonical writings of the community. In consequence, we have 2,500 years of Buddhist midrash, which began with the sutta, the scriptures that comprise the Pāli canon, and to which were added the documents that comprise the Chinese Tripiṭaka (*Shinsu Daizokyo*) and the Tibetan Tripiṭaka.

On this foundation the *Sarvāstivāda Jñanaprasthāna* and the *Mahāvibhāṣā* were constructed, the latter a commentary on the former, which in turn was a commentary on the *Sutrapiṭaka*. This progressive unfolding continued first with the *Abhidharma-hṛdaya*, and then with the *Abhidharma-kośa*, of the Vasubandhu. Simultaneously, the Theravāda school produced the *Petakopadesa*, the *Nettippakaraṇa*, and the highly influential *Milindapañha*. And these works were followed by the major fifth-century commentaries of Buddhaghosa, which themselves achieved a near-canonical status as *Buddhavacanam* (Buddha works), in certain parts of the Buddhist world—for example, in Sri Lanka. These were followed by the smaller, more manageable works of Buddhadatta—for example, his *Abhidharmāvatāra*—and Anuruddha's *Abhidammatthasaṅgaha*.[10]

Internal, ongoing theological debates and the spread of Buddhism throughout southeast Asia meant the further production of commentaries reflecting, in part, local customs and religious mores. So, for example, in thirteenth-century Japan, both Nichiren and Shinran gave Buddhism original, "local," formulations that subsequently grew into two separate Japanese schools of Buddhism. Earlier, before 100 C.E., the Indian Mahāyāna school had developed a new and repercussive literature on the matter of emptiness. Kajiyama Yūichi describes its development in four stages over a period of roughly one thousand years, as follows:

> (1) the period of formation of the *Sūtra of Perfect Wisdom in 8,000 lines* (*Astasāhasrikā-prajñapāramitā-sūtra*), which is the basic Perfection of Wisdom sūtra (before 100 CE), itself having older and newer layers; (2) the period of enlargement (100–300), during which the basic sūtra was enlarged to form the *Sūtras on Perfect Wisdom in 18,000 lines, 25,000 lines, and 100,000 lines*, prose compositions named after the number of thirty-two-syllable śloka (stanzas) they contain; (3) the period of condensed scriptures in prose and verse (300–500), such as the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Vajracchedikā*) and the *Heart Sūtra* (*Prajñāpāramita-hṛdaya*); (4) the Tantric period (600–1200), in which scriptures were composed under the influence of Tantrism. The most important of these sūtras was translated into Chinese several times, and Hsuan-tsang compiled a six-hundred-volume collection of almost all the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras.[11]

Of course, these strata of comments produced still further responses, and novel initiatives like the Pure Land construal(s). But we need follow this chain no further, except that we should emphasize that Buddhism, like the other major religious-mystical communities, is a community in which sacred scripture and its continuing exploration play an essential role.

This brief review of the extant commentary literature produced within the world's great mystical traditions offers strong evidence that such interpretive activity has been central to these traditions as well as to the larger religious communities of which they are an integral part. I now progress to more intricate hermeneutical matters that help us to comprehend the contents of these esoteric sources.

## First Hermeneutical Issues

Before further inquiry—for example, before examining specific examples of how the relationship between sacred scripture and mystical experience (and teaching) has been instantiated, and before considering the many epistemological, methodological, and hermeneutical issues that the analysis of such examples will raise—we should explicitly state one essential precondition of all such relationships: mystics across traditions and cultures have always assumed that the sacred texts of their traditions are authentic centers of divine, transcendental, ultimate truth.[12] As Hugh of Saint Victor describes it, the study of scripture seeks "an understanding of the secrets of God,"[13] nothing less than the "secrets of God," while Hallaj announces, in reflecting on the centrality of the Qurʾān, especially verses 7:1 and 47:19: "fi'l Qurʾān ilm kull shay" (In the Qurʾān is the knowledge of all created things). The sacred texts—that is, the texts taken as sacred—are not just literary compositions but also revelations, the opening up of God's will, or, in nontheistic language, the source, the ground, for the disclosure of what is Ultimate. These texts are not merely human accounts, the product of human imagination, no matter how lofty and sublime they may be. They, and their interpretation—a subject to which we return again and again—are authoritative, the very *Urgrund* for all subsequent theological insights and aspirations. For this reason the definition of the Vedas as *śruti* is "truths that were heard" by *ṛṣi*s (seers) at the beginning of the cycle of creation. And, complementarily, *ṛṣi*s are defined as seers because they "see the truth." In like manner, the mystical quest is, quite literally, the discovery or rediscovery of the mysteries encoded in scripture, the recovery of the superabundant truth and meanings hidden in these primal documents.

Consistent with this, another premise conceives of these specially valued documents—or at least some of them—as being ontologically primitive, that is, as part of the very fabric of reality itself. So the sages of the rabbinic era referred to the Torah as the blueprint of all creation:

> R. Hoshaiah opined: "Then I was beside Him as an *'āmôn*, and I was His delight day after day" (Prov. 8.30). . . . *'Āmôn* is an artisan ("*ûmān*). The Torah declares, "I was the working instrument (*kelî*) of the Holy One, blessed be He." In the normal course of affairs, when a mortal king builds a palace he does not build it by his own skill but by the skill of an architect. Moreover, the architect does not build it out of his head but makes use of plans and tablets in order to know how to make the rooms and the doors. Thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked (*hibbît*) into the Torah and created the world. And the Torah declares, "with *re'sîṯ* [E. V. 'In the beginning'] God created" (Gen. 1.1) and re'sîṯ means nothing other than the Torah, as it is said, "The Lord made me *re'sîṯ* [E. V. 'as the beginning'] of His way" (Prov. 8.22).[14]

The text of the Torah was the design by which god "created" the angels "and all the worlds and through which they all subsist." Every word, name, or genealogical list, if properly deciphered, reveals the guiding wisdom by which the Almighty organizes creation. As the *Zohar Chadash* describes it, "There is no difference [in the spiritual significance] between [the list] of captains of Esau and the Ten Commandments for it's all one entity and one structure."[15]

In a different idiom, and as part of an alternative theological Weltanschauung, the *Jaimīnya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* describes the threefold creation of the world from the Vedas as follows:

> Prajāpati indeed conquered this [universe] by means of the threefold Veda (*traya veda*). . . . He reflected, “If the other gods sacrifice thus by means of this Veda they will certainly conquer this conquest that is mine. Well then let me extract the essence (*rasa*) of the threefold Veda.” [Saying] “*bhūḥ*,” he extracted the essence of the Ṛg-Veda. That became this earth. The essence of it that streamed forth became Agni, fire, the essence of the essence. [Saying] “*bhuvah*,” he extracted the essence of the Yajur-Veda. That became the midregions. The essence of it that streamed forth became Vāyu, wind, the essence of the essence. [Saying] “*svaḥ*,” he extracted the essence of the Sāma-Veda. That became yonder heaven. The essence of it that streamed forth became Āditya, the sun, the essence of the essence. Now of one syllable (*akṣara*) alone he was not able to extract the essence: Om, of this alone. That became this Vāc.[16]

Compare with this Śaṅkara’s description of the Vedas that parallels, in many ways, the midrashic and zoharic notion of the Torah as the blueprint of creation:

> How then is it known that the world arises from the word (*śabda*)? “From direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumana*).” “Direct perception” denotes *śruti*, the authoritativeness (*pramanya*) of which is due to its independence. “Inference” denotes *smirti*, the authoritativeness of which is due to its dependence on [*śruti*]. These two prove that the creation was preceded by the word. Thus, *śruti* says, “[Saying] *‘ete’* (‘these’ ’

> I feel no shame in describing my own experience, a thing I know from its having occurred numberless times. On occasion, after deciding to follow the standard procedure of writing on philosophical doctrines and knowing precisely the elements of my composition, I have found my understanding sterile and barren and have abandoned my project without result. . . . At other times I have come empty and have suddenly become full, the ideas descending like snow, so that under the impact of divine possession I had been filled with corybantic frenzy and become ignorant of everything, place, people present, myself, what was said, and what was written. For I acquired expression, ideas, an enjoyment of light, sharp-sighted vision, exceedingly distinct clarity of objects, such as might occur through the eyes as the result of the clearest display.[19]

Going still further, a medieval Christian spiritual master describes the "pious probing into the profundities of scripture" as an act of "retrieving Christ the Lord from the depths of the Scriptures."[20] Likewise, Eckhart refers to the central concern of his investigation of scripture—a highly ramified enterprise in which he was irresistibly and continuously engaged—as the experience of "Christ, the truth" in the text.[21] It was in this broad experiential sense that Catholic mystics looked to scripture as "magistra fidei nostrae" (the mistress of our faith). And it is with reference to this same experiential mode that Louis Massignon describes Qurʾānic recitation as an event during which "the heart is called upon to experience a particular creative inference, *taf'il*, [that is], one of those adorable modalizations of the uncreated will, the multiform during realization."[22]

It should also be remembered, given the enormous importance of Neoplatonism for subsequent Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystical traditions, that the pagan, Neoplatonic doctrine attests to a similar reverence for texts, but now the apposite texts comprise the Platonic corpus. Speusippus (c. 407–339 B.C.E.) already appears to believe Plato was the son of Apollo, and by the beginning of the fourth century B.C.E., Plato's works had achieved a canonical status in the Academy. The philosophical tradition that spans the centuries from Speusippus and Xenocrates (396–314 B.C.E.), to Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 130 B.C.E.–67 B.C.E.) and Philo of Alexandria—and that culminates in Plotinus—treats the Platonic dialogues as scripture. They are assigned the transcendental status of "wisdom" (*sophia*) and are likened to theological (i.e., not only philosophical) sources of authority. On the basis of this normative assumption, for example, Philo is able to make Plato a distinguished student of Moses (through the mediation of Pythagoras[23] and Jeremiah), while Moses is seen as the supreme teacher of middle Platonic doctrine. This assumption also allows the Torah to be read as a Platonic allegory, while Plato can be read as a mystical Jewish midrash. And in a related way, this belief permitted the middle Platonists to define philosophical inquiry as "a striving after wisdom" that produces the religious experience of "the release and turning away of the soul from the body."[24]

In India, too, the exploration of, and involvement with, scripture is a foundational religious experience—so, for example, the recitation of the Vedic mantras constitutes the doorway to ultimate religious experience. In the Hindu metaphysical environment, the essential mystical practice of Vedic recitation depends on the assumed status of the mantras as a form of *śruti*—that is, the mantra is derived from the Vedas, which have the absolute status of transcendental word/truth. For this reason the recitation of the mantra, in effect, repeats the original act of "speaking" and "hearing" that occurred

at the beginning of the cosmic cycle, when the *ṛṣi*s "heard" the Vedas for the first time. The repetition of the mantra provides a contemporary moment of *śruti*, of revelation and religious experience. Concentration on the sound/syllable *Om* is given primacy due to its status as the "essence" of the Vedas and the sound-form of the Brahman.[25]

If the Qurʾān, the Torah, and the Vedas were not the source of truth, wisdom, and grace, as well as the portals through which one goes to meet the Divine, the Absolute, then the mystics of the great religions of the world would have had no interest in them. Their deep and abiding concern with—their extraordinary immersion in—these texts is rooted precisely in the belief that the texts are transcendental ontic markers of absolute significance. Ibn ʿArabi's Muslim credo states: "The Qurʾān unveils all the knowledges sent down in the scriptures and contains that which is not contained by them. He who has been given the Qurʾān has been given the perfect luminosity (*diyaʾ*) which comprises every knowledge."[26] This exalted sentiment can be paralleled in the respective teachings of nearly every major mystical tradition vis-à-vis its particular canonical source. In other words, only if the Qurʾān "unveils all the knowledges" there ever were and will be, and if the Torah is "min ha-shamayim" (from heaven),[27] and if the Vedas "are unlimited and without end"[28] can the great mystical communities built on these scriptural foundations function. To reverse the argument, if these authoritative texts were denied their transcendental status or otherwise rejected, these traditions would collapse. In turn, this argument can and should be broadened and applied to other mystical traditions and to their reliance on, and engagement with, scripture as appropriate. Even in the Zen tradition we find this rebuke: "A bigoted believer in nihilism blasphemes against the sūtras on the ground that literature . . . is unnecessary. . . . You [disciples] should know that it is a serious offense to speak ill of the sūtras, for the consequence is grave indeed."[29] The Zen master knew, relative to the structure of Buddhist teaching and belief, whereof he spoke.

## *The Pluralism of Scriptural Interpretation*

Given these shared presuppositions regarding scripture that are held by mystical practitioners, it now becomes possible—since the governing preconditions and a priori assumptions have been adequately conceptualized and properly contextualized—to take up some of the salient issues that arise from the diverse and fascinating techniques of scriptural exegesis and interpretation that spiritual masters employ. In fact, this becomes immediately necessary for the study of mysticism because mystics, almost always, are not only learned students of scripture but also teachers and seekers who understand their discrete teaching and goal as *an*, if not *the*, authentic reading of (a particular) scripture. Even, or perhaps especially, when they offer apparently radical doctrinal views, they most usually do so in terms that relate their doctrines, no matter how novel,[30] to the canonical source of their tradition. They do this both for purposes of legitimation—that is, in order to justify their seemingly idiosyncratic claims—and because they sincerely believe that the master text that is appealed to has inexhaustible levels of meaning, the innermost layers of which they alone, rather than the "ordinary" believer or rational exegete, are able to plumb. Precisely because the text is God's Word (Logos, *aql*, *śruti*, or Torah), it carries the inherent possibility, even the necessity, of multiple meanings.

This open-endedness, this prospect of interpretive possibilities, engenders such hermeneutical schema as the threefold method of understanding favored by a long and distinguished line of Christian exegetes, one that runs from Jerome and Origen to Eckhart and beyond, and that divides the meanings in scripture into three categories: the theological, the natural, and the moral. As Eckhart described this method in his *Commentary on Exodus*: "Sacred scripture frequently tells a story in such a way that it also contains and suggests mysteries, teaches the natures of things, furnishes and sets in order moral actions."[31] Again, this presumed hermeneutical openness encourages the construction of the "fourfold" method of scriptural interpretation that was employed by patristic and medieval Christian mystics; the similar (though not exactly) kabbalistic theory of the four types of exegesis of the Torah, known by the acronym *PaRDeS*; the traditions of *taʾwil* and *tafsir* among Sufis; and the threefold method of Vedic interpretation that deciphers the text as referring to the *adhiyajña* (sacrificial acts), to the *adhidaiva* (gods), and to the *adhyatma* (self).

This type of conceptual paradigm, this allowance for polysemous readings, also makes room for many schools of mystical (and nonmystical) interpretation. Thus, in the Middle Ages, there were not only differences between Jewish rationalists and kabbalists, but even among kabbalists themselves; there were Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, and other types of interpretation among patristic and medieval Christian mystical (and nonmystical) exegetes; there were not only Sunni and Shia ways, but also distinctively, and diverse, Sufi ways of reading the Qurʾān; there were six *Darsána*s—the competing schools of Vedic teaching—within Hinduism; and the traditionally counted eighteen early schools of Buddhist doctrine. Ibn ʿArabī interestingly explains the grounds of this diversity of meaning within the totality of divine revelation:

> As far as the Word of God is concerned, when it is revealed in the language of a certain people, and when those who speak this language differ as to what God meant by a certain word or group of words, due to the variety of possible meanings of the words, each of them—however differing their interpretations may be—effectively comprises what God meant, provided that the interpretation does not deviate from the accepted meanings of the language in question. God knows all these meanings, and there is none that is not the expression of what he meant to say to this specific person. But if the individual in question deviates from the accepted meanings in the language, then neither understanding nor knowledge has been received. . . . As for him to whom understanding of all the faces of the divine Word has been given, he has received *wisdom and decisive judgment* [Qurʾān 38:20], that is, the faculty of distinguishing among these faces.[32]

Ibn ʿArabī's assumptions about the Qurʾān that justify this interpretational pluralism have parallels in other, non-Sufi, mystical communities that share the premise that because God—or the Ultimate, whatever the Ultimate is—is the author of scripture, every true interpretation of scripture was already intended by Him/It.

At the same time, however, this openness has to be understood correctly: the suggestive flexibility of these mystical interpretive systems is not to be confused with the absence of all limits. And this is true in at least two senses. First, each tradition holds that there are things that the canonical texts do not (and could not) claim and do not (and could not) teach. So, for example, for Jewish kabbalists the Torah cannot have Christological meanings, though it does possess such meanings for the Christian tradition in general and for Christian kabbalists like Pico della Mirandola and

Johannes Reuchlin in particular. Conversely, for Christian kabbalists the Jewish reading of scripture, particularly of the *mitzvot*, is not, and cannot be, correct. This should not be surprising insofar as Judaism and Christianity (mystical and nonmystical) are rooted in alternative systems of legitimation and plausibility. Similarly, Śaṅkara rejects the cardinal teachings of the Buddhists while the Buddhists reject his insistence on the reality of Ātman and Brahman. Second, each mystical tradition recognizes specific texts as canonical, and not others. Jewish mystics authorize the Torah, not the New Testament or the Qurʾān or the Vedas or the works of the Pāli Canon; Christian mystics authorize the Torah and the New Testament, not the Qurʾān or the Vedas or the Pāli Canon. Sufis, following the teachings of the Qurʾān,[33] authorize the Torah, the New Testament, the *Zend Avesta*, and indeed the Qurʾān but give absolute priority and ultimacy to the Qurʾān, while at the same time denying the Vedas and the Pali Canon. Hindus deny the Western scriptural tradition and the Pāli Canon, and they authorize the Vedas and other subordinate Sanskrit texts like the *Brāhmaṇas*. Buddhists reject the various Western scriptures, as well as those of Hinduism. Indeed, insofar as all of these—and other religious communities—are defined by the texts they hold sacred, this process of textual affirmation and negation is one of the essential activities of any such community.

I introduce this recognition of constraints not only to support the notion that mystical interpretation knows limits, but also to reinforce the claim that these limits are connected to orthodox and prescriptive religious axioms and rules that operate within the traditions from which they emerge. Hence while the *Bahir*, the Zohar, and Lurianic texts do creative things with the inherited Torah text, it is only with the Torah text that they do marvelous things. Conversely, Hindus do not pursue their fundamental meditative techniques through the recitation of the Hebrew texts of Genesis or Deuteronomy, because these texts lack, in their view, the gnostic, cosmic power of the Sanskrit scriptures. *Om* cannot be replaced by the Tetragrammaton or by the Greek Jesus Prayer or by the *tahlil* formula "La ilāha illāʾllāh'." Likewise, the vast Sufi exegetical tradition that is based on the Arabic of the Qurʾān cannot, for the Sufi, be replicated in any other language. Only the divine speech to the Prophet provides the secure grounds for comprehending Allah's self-disclosure (*tajalli*) and the hermeneutical truths derivative from this ontic origin. Moreover, mystical interpretation must at least generally conform to accepted moral rules—and often mystics set far higher standards. As the Venerable Bede described this relationship, "Tropologice, id est, juxtra moralis intelligentiae regulas"[34] (tropology, which is to say, in accordance with the rules of moral understanding).[35] Then, too, when one provides a reading of a canonical text, despite the legitimate interpretational multiformity recognized above, the original context of the relevant scriptural verses has to be taken into account and "respected" (this is a very broadly interpreted rule). This latter requirement has arisen because scripture was revealed by God and is, therefore, to be assessed as an "ordo divinae dispensationis" (an order based on divine dispensation). In the language of the rabbinic tradition, it is held to be "min ha-shamayim" ([unchanging] teaching from heaven). In the idiom of Hinduism, it is regarded as "the eternal eye of the ancestors, gods, and human beings" (*Manu-Smṛti* 12:94). In the formula of the Qurʾān, it is considered in these terms: "lā tabdīla fī kalimāti Ilah" (the words of Allah do not change) (sura 10:64). Now, even though one immediately recognizes that this requirement is

inherently ambiguous, it is not meaningless, and mystics were not, and did not feel themselves, altogether free to treat their sacred scripture as a Rorschach test. And history affirms that they did not.

One further issue must be introduced into this already overly complex, dialectical, hermeneutical circumstance. Contrary to the misunderstanding of the mystical principles of exegesis that, because they claim to center on the "deeper," "spiritual" purport of the text, are usually portrayed as denigrating the literal meaning of the scripture, it is essential to recognize that the mystical interpreter, while searching out the underlying purposes and truths encoded in the canonical sources, generally acknowledges both the objective correctness and the value of the exoteric doctrine entailed in the literal meaning of the authoritative text. Indeed, it is essential that the literal text be given normative value as the direct revelation of God or, à la the Vedas, categorized as *śruti*, so that it can serve as the indubitable basis for all further investigation and interpretation, that is, if other (mystical) hermeneutical possibilities are to exist. Alternatively, to deny the verbatim account is to diminish God's or Being's power of expression—on the original assumption that the text is God's own speech, or *śruti*—and to suggest that He/It does not mean what He/It reveals. Therefore, the literal level, while not the only or final level—and with the full awareness that the term *literal* is in need of much further analysis and that it even, at times, undergoes redefinition, as, for example, in the twelfth book of Augustine's *Confessions* and in Eckhart's "Prologue" to his *Book of the Parables of Genesis*—is always appreciated as a necessarily true level. I note, in addition, that all of the symbolical equivalencies, mathematical letter permutations—as, for example, in *notrakon* and *gematria* and their parallels in Arabic, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Pāli texts—analogical arguments, gnostic and theosophical modes of textual fusion and fission, and other mystical methods of reading and analytic deconstruction and reconstruction depend on the authenticity, integrity, and authority of the literal construction of scripture. All these imaginative forms of mystical interpretation enrich the signification of the literal sources, but they never cancel or alter them.

Most important, though this is not its only material implication, this entails that at least in the main Western mystical traditions and in Buddhism—especially relative to the Buddha's sermons and enlightenment—the historicity of the events reported in the scriptural documents, the historical narrative they tell, is affirmed as having occurred as narrated. Whatever further secrets the historic story alludes to, the historic story is, and must be, accurate as history. So while Rumi and Ibn ʿArabī read the Qurʾān gnostically, they never deny the historicity of Muhammad, his *miraj*, and his revelation. While Abulafia and Moses de Leon read the Torah theosophically, they never question the historicity of the Exodus, the giving of the law to Moses at Sinai, or the wandering in the desert. Neither does Bonaventure or Eckhart, who both adhere to the approach of negative theology initiated by Pseudo-Dionysus, cast a shadow of doubt on the "biographical" tale of Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection as it is retold in the Gospels. Commenting on John 1:6, Eckhart affirms his belief in the report concerning the relationship of John the Baptist and Jesus—what he refers to as the historical *veritas*—even though his primary interest in this material, as in other New Testament sources, lies in exposing "serum naturalium et earum proprietas" (truths of natural things and their properties). Eckhart may, eventually, take us far into the

recesses of his medieval Neoplatonic, scholastic ontology but the whole of his message depends, in the first instance, on the historical validity of John the Baptist and Jesus, and the dialogue said to have occurred between them. Though the object of his exceptional discourse may be to uncover the riches beneath the literal text—"latentia sub figura et superficie sensus litteralis"—to know just where to dig, to explain this specific story and not another, to comment on a given word and not a different one, is inextricably tied to the tale told in John 1:6 and throughout the Gospels, whose authority, sanctity, and legitimacy is the sine qua non for the Meister's entire contemplative project of *Abgeschiedenheit* (detachment from things) and of *Gelassenheit* (abandonment of oneself in God).[36]

Ibn ʿArabī, one of the most radical theosophical reinterpreters in the whole of the Sufi tradition, speaks of Muhammad's prophetic role and the status of the Qurʾān and insists on the following principle:

> He was told: transmit that which has been revealed to you! And he did not stray from the very form of that which had been revealed to him, but rather transmitted to us exactly what had been told to him; for the meanings that descended upon his heart descended in the form of a certain combination of letters, of a certain arrangement of words, of a certain order of verses, of a certain composition of those suras whose totality comprises the Qurʾān. From that moment on God gave the Qurʾān a form. It is that form that the Prophet has shown, such as he himself had contemplated it. . . . If he had changed something, what he brought to us would have been the form of his own understanding, and not the revelation that he had received. It would not be the Qurʾān, as it came to him, that he transmitted to us.[37]

This is a principle we, too, would do well to remember if we wish to comprehend the thought of such towering figures as Ibn ʿArabī, Eckhart, and DeLeon.

## A Detailed Analysis of the Forms of Interpretation

I now analyze, in more detail, some of the concrete forms and methods of interpretation that are employed by various mystics and mystical schools across esoteric traditions.

### *PaRDeS—Four Levels of Scriptural Meaning*

I begin with the widely employed technique that is called, by the medieval Jewish mystics, PaRDeS (orchard), an acronym derived from four Hebrew words used to describe four different levels of textual reading: *Peshat* = literal (or "plain"); *Remez* = allegorical; *Derash* = homiletical; *Sod* = mystical. This method has a close, though not an exact, parallel among Christian mystics, who, as characterized in one well-known Latin couplet, held, "Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia" (The letter [of scripture] teaches events; allegory, what you should believe; morality teaches what you should do; anagogy, what mark you should be aiming for).[38] In this comparative context, the *littera gesta docet* is comparable to the Jewish understanding of *peshat*; *allegoria* is related to the Jewish sense of *remez*, but has a more distinctively typological character—that is, in comparison

to the freer allegorical style favored by the earlier rabbinic sages or to the more philosophical allegory of the medieval philosophers; *moralis* is not simply *derash* (homily) but a more narrowly defined moral reading of scripture;[39] and *anagogia* overlaps with the category of *sod* but is not simply equivalent to it because *anagogia* narrowly concentrates on the fate of the soul after death, while *sod*, *yesodei ha-Torah* (the "secrets" of the Torah), involves much more than this otherworldly concern.[40] At the same time, however, transcending the relevant parallels, overlaps, and distinctions is the consequential claim, shared by both of these fourfold "systems," that scripture is polysemous. So Augustine had already argued: "What harm does it do to me that different meanings can be taken from the same words as long as they are true?"[41]

Despite their hierarchical arrangement, the four tiers of the PaRDeS do not work in such a way that the "superior" levels, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod*, cancel out the meaning of *peshat*, or that *sod* invalidates the significance of the homiletical (*derash*) or allegorical (*remez*) strata. Rather, each level has its own integrity and, in its special way, confirms and supports the other levels of meaning. In the words of Gregory the Great's *Commentary on 1 Kings*: "Be strengthened by the plain as well as the profound meanings of scripture."[42]

The method of PaRDeS, and its Christian parallel, is so well known as not require further general description at this juncture.[43] However, a few amplifying notes on specific aspects of this technique will add to our understanding and appreciation of it.

First, and most fundamental, the polysemous understanding of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—and later the Qurʾān—created the possibility of perceiving the enterprise of mystical theology as coincident with mystical exegesis. (And it created, at the same time, the fertile interconnection between theology, exegesis, and mystical experience.) Bonaventure, whose Neoplatonic interpretations of scripture are masterpieces of the medieval Christian mystical and exegetical traditions, makes this unbreakable symbiosis of scripture and theology eminently clear when he speaks of "sacra scriptura quae theologia dicitur" (sacred scripture that is called theology), a position, an understanding, he shared with Aquinas as well as with Eckhart.[44] All theology is a version—a vision—of scripture. Consider, for example, Ibn ʿArabī's theosophical comment on the Qurʾānic verse: "Have we not appointed for him [man] two eyes . . . and guided him on two highways?" (90:8–10):

> The Real is sheer Light, while the impossible (*al-muḥāl*) is sheer darkness (*zuema*). Darkness never turns into light, nor does light turn into darkness. Creation is the Barzakh between Light and darkness. In its essence it is qualified neither by darkness nor by light, since it is the Barzakh and the Middle (*al-wasaṭ*), which has a property from each of its two sides. That is why He appointed for man two eyes and guided him on the two paths. Through one eye and one path he accepts light and looks upon it in the measure of his preparedness. Through the other eye and the other path he looks upon darkness and turns toward it.
>
> In himself, man is neither light nor darkness, since he is neither existent nor nonexistent. He is the firm impediment which prevents sheer light from dispelling darkness, and he prevents sheer darkness from taking away sheer light. He receives the two sides through his own essence, and he acquires, through this reception, that light whereby he is described as "existent" and that darkness whereby he is described as "nonexistent." So he shares in both sides and protects both sides.

Everything manifest in the cosmos is an imaginal, engendered form that conforms to a divine form. For He discloses Himself to the cosmos only in accordance with that which corresponds (*munāsaba*) to the cosmos—in the entity of an immutable substance, just as man is immutable in respect of his substance. Thus you see the immutable through the immutable, and that is "unseen" in respect to you and Him. You see the manifest through the manifest, and that is the "witnessed, the witnesser, and the witnessing" in respect to you and Him.

Just as you perceive Him, you perceive your own essence. However, in every form you are known to be you, not other than you. Exactly in the same way, you know that Zayd is Zayd and no one else, even though he undergoes variation in his qualities, such as shame and fear, illness and health, satisfaction and wrath, and every state through which he fluctuates. Hence we say that so-and-so has changed from state to state and from form to form. Were it not for the fact that this is the situation, we would not know him once his state changed and we would say that he no longer exists.

Hence, we come to know that there are two eyes, as God said: "Have We not appointed for him two eyes?" (90:8). One eye is that through which he who undergoes transmutation is perceived. These are two different paths which God has made clear to the Possessor of Two Eyes, as He said, "And guided him on the two highways" (90:10), that is, made clear for him the two paths. . . .

Each eye has a path. So know whom you see and what you see. For this reason it is correct that, "You did not throw when you threw, but God threw" (8:17). The eye through which you perceive that the throwing belongs to God is different from the eye through which you perceive that the throwing belongs to Muhammad. So know that you have two eyes, if you possess the knowledge. Then you will know for certain that the thrower is God in the corporeal form of Muhammad. Imaginalization and assuming imaginal forms is nothing but this. . . .

This is the station of "God created Adam upon His own form." When someone makes something upon his own form, that thing is identical to the form, so it is it/not it. Hence it is correct to say, "You did not throw when you threw," for the root of everything which became manifest from that form derives from Him upon whose form it is.[45]

This deeply gnostic reading that finds Allah everywhere and nowhere; that connects man and his Creator and distinguishes completely between man and his Creator; that is witness to Allah's disclosure in all things and denies His disclosure in anything; that insists that Allah's ultimate revelation, the Qurʾān, is both qurʾān (a reality that acts to bring things together) and *furqān* (that which differentiates things from one another)—this reading is, for Ibn ʿArabī, the truest type of exegesis. Now, one might well question this assertion, this theosophical form of explication, but a reader will never understand Ibn ʿArabī's work if he does not take totally seriously the claim that what is transpiring—however much it looks like eisegetical theology—is exegesis. To even begin to comprehend Ibn ʿArabī, one must take as a given that Ibn ʿArabī believed that, through all of his theosophical instruction, he was doing nothing other than teaching scripture.

To further support the present argument for the symbiosis of mystical theology and mystical exegesis, I recall an esoteric observation in the zoharic *Midrash ha-Ne-elam*: In commenting on a verse in Genesis, "Let there be light," the kabbalistic author makes a *theological* point on the basis of its numerological *exegesis*. He teaches that the "light" that is here indicated by the Hebrew word *or* (which has a numerical value of 207) refers "secretly" to *raz* (mystery), which also has the numerical value of 207—that is,

the light of the Torah is found in the mysteries it reveals.[46] Is this the real intention behind—the authentic meaning of—the words of Genesis? The a priori assumptions with which the medieval author of the *Midrash ha-Ne-elam* was working allowed him to answer this query affirmatively. The linkage between letters and numbers is just as fixed and just as relevant a part of scriptural hermeneutics as the relationship between letters and words. As a consequence, the words *or* and *raz*, revealed in the text by divine design, bear mystical possibilities, equivalencies, and correlations that can be appropriately identified as nothing other than exegesis. This zoharic midrash deciphers the Torah from the perspective of the totalizing character of God's revelation—that is, the fullness of its being and, therefore, its inherent possession of all theological truth, not matter how novel that may be. The belief in the plenitude of scripture, of its multivalent reading, legitimates this construal, at least as a tempting possibility, and, in so doing, binds together mystical teaching—understood as midrashic work—and biblical authority, the revelation at Sinai.

Comparable methods of reading scripture that produce theology out of exegesis can also be found among Advaitans, those who follow the principles of Mīmāṃṣa, and among adherents to the four additional classical orthodox Hindu philosophical schools of thought. Śaṅkara conceives his entire undertaking as exegesis and derives it from his absolute fidelity to the authority of the Vedas, however he reads them. Similarly, the Mīmāṃṣa school is defined by its distinctive manner of interpretation of Hindu scriptures. For the latter, the central issue is the establishing of a judicious reading of the Vedas as uncreated (*apauruṣeya*) and eternal (*nitya*). The school's unique line of argumentation concerning creation and eternity is actually a particular form of Vedic exegesis that is framed in opposition to the exegesis of the Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, and Yoga schools that favor some understanding, some permutation, of the Vedas as created (*pauruṣeya*) and noneternal (*anitya*).

Likewise, the centrality of the Hindu scriptures and of their interpretation in the Weltanschauung of the Advaitan school has been wisely described in these terms:

> For Advaita, the success of any theory of meaning arises from its relative success in explaining, consonantly with Advaita teachings, the meaning of the great sentences of the Upaniṣads. Sometimes there are said to be four of these great sentences, one from each Veda: "Brahman is wisdom" (*prajñānam brahma*) [*Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3.5.3]); "I am Brahman" (*aham brahmaṣmi*) [*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10]); "That art thou" (*tat tvam asi*) [*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7]); and "this Self is Brahman" (*ayam ātmā brahma*) [*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 4.2].

This is not just a general statement of basic theological principles. For Śaṅkara and his disciples it carries concrete metaphysical implications:

> Let us consider "that art thou." Uttered by Uddālaka Āruṇi to his son Śvetaketu, the context suggests that by "that" the sentence refers to Brahman; by "thou" it refers to Śvetaketu's self; and by "art" it is indicated that these two referents are identical. However, this straightforward explanation presents several problems for the Advaitin. For one thing, Śaṃkara explains in several places that Brahman is ineffable in the sense that words (even "Brahman") cannot denote It directly. It would seem to follow that if "that" means Brahman, it must mean it indirectly, consistently with Śaṃkara's thesis.
>
> Is "that art thou" metaphorical, then, a figurative identification—one's self is like Brahman, or Brahman is like one's true Self? No, Śaṃkara replies: figurative language

> presupposes the speaker's knowledge that the things identified are really different, whereas "That art thou," insofar as it provides Self-knowledge, presupposes that the speaker knows that things are really identical. If one says, "Devadatta is a lion" figuratively, he knows Devadatta is not a lion.[47]

In this instance we see Śaṅkara using as his premise the famous scriptural pronouncement "tat tvam asi," and propounding his central doctrines of "self" and of Brahman as direct exposition of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. In so doing he follows a long and central tradition of Advaitan interpretation that began in the writings of Gauḍapādacarya[48] and that functions through the commentarial mode. In Śaṅkara's case, beginning with a commentary on the *Māṇḍūkyakārikās* and on the *Taittirīyabhāṣya*, and culminating in his mature works, such as the *Brahmasutrabhasya*, the entire theological enterprise is sustained by a desire to interpret and defend a particular conception of the creative and eternal nature of the Vedas and of related canonical literature. Because these sources derive from Brahman, because, indeed, "Brahman is their source,"[49] they are eternal, essential, unchanging, and containing all wisdom—Brahman's wisdom. In sum, Śaṅkara's entire vast Advaitan project is encouraged and defended by a titanic effort at comprehending what he calls the "great *śāstra*," the hymn of praise, which is the *Ṛg-Veda*. For it is the *Ṛg-Veda* and related texts that together constitute *śabdapramāṇa*, the totality of revelation and authoritative testimony that alone provides certain knowledge.

Second—relative to the methodology of the PaRDeS—these complicated forms of exegesis, and this collaboration of exegesis and theology, are grounded, in the first instance, in a highly traditional piety. While these esoteric modes of interpretation are made to yield many exotic theological fruits, speculative flights of metaphysical and transcendental reconstruction, and even, on occasion, deviant and revolutionary religious teachings, the inner drive, that which generates and compels their applications, is a profound desire to maintain the authoritative, original revelation of the (diverse) traditions. This is to recognize that the move to allegorical, typological, moral, anagogical, and mystical interpretations of scripture is grounded in, among other causes, a desire to defend these *Ur*-texts against various forms of criticism, trivialization, and reductionism. When those who believe in the authenticity and authority of (a particular) scripture encounter criticism of their holy text, they need to defend it, and one way to do this is to find "higher" meanings in the text, and in its accompanying tradition, than a cursory or literal reading would reveal. This apologetic inspiration had already been evidenced in the Greek defenses of the Homeric texts that, by the time of Socrates and Plato, if not considerably earlier, were being decoded allegorically in order to save them from a blistering attack on their mythological and (im)moral content. Ancient reports tell us that Anaxagoras expounded Homer in a specifically ethical way, as Dante would later read various biblical tales à la the category of *moralis*; that his student, Metrodorus of Lampsacus, exposited Homer symbolically—for example, Hector was the moon and Achilles the sun;[50] and that Democritus of Abdera saved the Homeric text by explaining it allegorically.[51] Plato explicitly criticizes this defensive strategy and lampoons those "great Homer experts" who interpret Homer allegorically.[52] But such methodological maneuvers were required by lovers of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* if the Homeric tales were not to be discredited by the new rationalism of the Periclean era.

In the history of Jewish exegesis, this method of revaluation begins to find significant employment in the Hellenistic era, and for good reason: the Torah, and Jewish tradition, seemed less rational and persuasive to many intellectuals (and others) than the philosophical tradition of the Greeks, especially as the latter was incarnated in Plato and Platonism. As a consequence, Jews began to reinterpret scripture either to deflect such criticism or to foster the belief in the fundamental compatability of the teachings of the Torah and Greek philosophy, however different they appeared in form and content. Philo of Alexandria ranks first among those who labored in this apologetic vineyard, but he was by no means a lone voice.[53] What was required in this context was the repudiation of Greek skepticism or mockery and the shielding of biblical teaching. The allegorical method made such a defense possible.[54] Philo consistently cautions that readers should not construe the biblical text in a simplistic and unsophisticated manner. It should always be interrogated through ὑπόνοια (hidden meaning) and ἀλληγορία (allegory) to reveal its true meaning. Philo was true to this declared position. His entire corpus on the *Allegorizing of the Laws* speaks to this conern.[55]

The church fathers likewise found the allegorical method appealing when they were required to defend their Christological beliefs. It provided defensive hermeneutical assistance for, among others, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and, above all, Origen. Alternatively, it was rightly and soundly attacked by, for example, Celsus and Porphyry, two major pagan opponents of the early church. The main concern of these early Christian allegorists was the championing of the Christian explication of scripture that entailed finding Christ anticipated and promised throughout the Hebrew Bible. Whether in Justin, Melito of Sardis, Irenaeus, or Origen, no matter how far-fetched this sort of construal appears—for example, the murdered Abel is Christ; Joseph, sold into slavery, is Christ; Moses, exiled to the desert, is Christ; the Passover sacrifice represents Christ—the object of this tendentiousness was to protect and conserve the New Testament message that Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of God's providential plan that began to unfold at Creation and that reached its climax at Calvary. It intended to show that the Catholic Christian reading of the Torah was the correct one; that the Jewish (or pagan or gnostic or heretical Christian) reading was false;[56] and that everywhere in the Torah the Christian truth, especially its soteriological and eschatological aspects, was embedded in such a way that it was only to be finally revealed clearly and fully in the Gospels.

Given the prominence of the allegorical reading among the church fathers, and recognizing, in particular, Origen's influence on later Christian scriptural exegesis and study, it is not surprising to find that mystical allegorical interpretations became central arguments in support of the Christian faith in the Middle Ages. Repeatedly, like Origen and Augustine before them, medieval mystics expressed their most cherished Christian beliefs through a particular Christian allegorical explication of scripture. Consider as exemplary the esoteric treatment—that is, the transvaluation—of the enormously threatening subject of sexuality as this is represented by the "pious" renderings given to the Song of Songs.[57] Following the lead of the rabbis, especially Rabbi Akiba, who insisted on an allegorical reading that understood the text as a love poem about God's relation to Israel: "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies"[58]—churchmen from the time of Origen, and afterward,[59] have interpreted the Song as rep-

resenting the romance of Christ and His church or Christ's love for the individual soul. Origen expresses both these possibilities in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*: "This little book is an epithalamium, that is, a nuptial song, which it seems to me that Solomon wrote in a dramatic form, and sang after the fashion of a bride to her bridegroom, who is the word of God, burning with celestial love. Indeed, he loves her deeply, whether she is the soul, made in his own image, or the church."[60]

Developing this line of understanding, Honorius Augustodunesis's *Exposito in Cantica Canticorum* beautifully describes Christ's love of and for the church. Relating the Song to the Virgin Mary, while seeing Mary as the symbol of the church, he writes:

> Therefore, this book is read on the feast of Blessed Mary, for it shows the type of the church, which is virgin and mother. Virgin, because uncorrupted by all heresy; mother because through grace it always bears spiritual children. And therefore everything which is said about the church can also be said about the Virgin, understood by both bride and mother of the bridegroom. There is a little book published by us, called *Sigillum S. Mariae*, in which all of the Song of Songs is specially adapted to her person.[61]

As such, overdetermined by theological assumptions about the inspired origin of the Song—"the author of the book is the Holy Spirit"[62]—its absolute religious virtuosity vouchsafed by its inclusion in the biblical canon, the physical sensuality of the Song is transformed into the spiritual intimacy of Christ and human beings (Christian mystics of both sexes will read the Song in this manner).

The classical medieval exposition is that given by Bernard of Clairvaux in a series of "Sermones" that were originally presented to his Cistercian community. Interpreting the Song as a tale of mystical ascent, Bernard, commenting on the verse "Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth" (Song of Songs, 1:1), guides the faithful from "kisses of the feet" to "kisses of the hand" "then, at last . . . to that mouth of Glory (I speak fearfully and trembling), not only to catch sight of it, but even to be kissed." In this rereading awe, reverence, fear, and finally nonphysical love replace the passionate, sexual language of the original. No longer a worldly eroticism, the Song becomes the apotheosis of sanctity, purity, and spirituality. Moreover, through the imaginative power of an allegorical rendering: "Now, according to the three states of love, there are three kisses of the lover. First, atonement or reconciliation; second, merit; third, contemplation. The first is of the feet; the second, of the hand; the third, of the mouth."[63] The actual human bodies of the male lover and the female beloved have passed away; they have been turned into a series of metaphors. The language of sexual union in the Song refers not to gross, carnal intercourse, but rather to the inflow of the divine into the human, and the raising up of the human to the transcendental: "By a special privilege, she receives him flowing from heaven into her intimate affections, and even into the innermost part of her heart, and she has present the one she desires, not in a shape (*non figuratum*) but in an infusion (*sed infusum*), not in appearance, but in affect; and without doubt it is more delightful because it is inward, not outward."[64] This is a metaphysical, nonbodily ecstasy, a union untainted by lust or degeneracy. In contrast to the negative view of the body, or of sexuality, that was held by the medieval church, this embrace is a perfect union, unsullied by sin, improper desire, or indecency. Bernard teaches:

> Be careful, however, not to conclude that I see something corporeal or perceptible to the senses in this union between the Word and the soul. My opinion is that of the Apostle, who said that "he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him." I try to express, with the most suitable words I can muster, the ecstatic ascent of the purified mind to God, and the loving descent of God into the soul, submitting spiritual truths to spiritual men. Therefore, let this union be in the spirit, because "God is a spirit," who is lovingly drawn by the beauty of that soul whom he perceives to be guided by the Spirit, and devoid of any desire to submit to the ways of the flesh, especially if he sees that it burns with love for himself.[65]

Famously summarizing the quality of this mystical love affair of which Bernard writes, Hugh of St. Victor notes:

> But, you ask, who is this bridegroom, who is his bride? The bridegroom is God, the bride is the soul. The bridegroom is at home when he fills the mind with inward joy; he goes away when he takes away the sweetness of contemplation. But by what similitude is the soul said to be the bride of God? She is the bride because she is joined to him by a chaste love. She is the bride, since by the breath of the Holy Spirit she is made fertile with the offspring of the virtues.[66]

Piety and mystical dogma have combined, through an allegorical unfolding, to subvert the sexual content of, and to domesticate, the Song of Songs, making it, in the process, the preferred book of the mystical soul.[67] In effect, esotericism, mediated through cycles of scriptural exegesis, is the handmaiden of piety in this long Christian tradition. (Parenthetically, it should also be emphasized in this connection that what one has in all of these lofty decipherments of the love poetry of the Song is not a personal description of ecstatic experience—whatever the personal experience of the mystical author may be—but, rather, the repeated application of a literary-philosophical convention, according to which such renderings of the Song have essentially become standardized.)

Third—relative to the PaRDeS—and without elaboration, I should note that all these allegorical readings are, like all other allegorical readings, *necessarily* contextual. Noncontextual allegory is in fact inconceivable. Moreover, it is contextual in at least two senses: (1) the original text has a context in which it is read—for example, the synagogue or the rabbinical academy, the church or the monastic community, the mosque or among the Sufi brethren; and (2) it is contextual in that these socioreligious environments themselves evolve and reflect historical and historicized contexts. This means that not only is a Jewish reading not a Christian reading or a Muslim reading but also that a first-century Jewish or Christian reading is not a medieval Neoplatonic reading—as, for example, in Bernard of Clairvaux—or a modern existentialist, kabbalistic, or scholarly reading.[68]

Fourth, the PaRDeS, the theory that there can be and are multiple levels of exegesis of scripture, makes possible radical theological innovation within the ruling normative frame of reference. Because of the larger presumptive theological context in which PaRDeS operates, radical notions can be entertained and utilized without becoming heterodox or heretical. This freedom is made possible by mystical deconstructions of the authoritative texts—that is, analyses that operate at the level of *yesodei ha Torah* (secrets of the Torah), of anagogy, and of *batin* (secrets). At this exalted level, which is made known through the special exegetical techniques utilized by the mystic, even

the most extraordinary doctrines now taught as a mystical commentary could be justified as "secrets" belonging to the *mira profunditis* (the "wondrous profundity") of scripture, their exceptionality reflecting their transcendental or divine origin.

Examples of this important type of extreme exegesis are found in nearly all the great mystical traditions. One immediately recalls the sexual interpretations fo the medieval kabbalists that employ an extraordinary explicitness, even attributing to the Almighty—"as if one could say this"[69]—a penis. As a result, the imagery of the Song of Songs becomes the locus for a highly erotic transcendental vision that includes the "coupling" of divine male and female elements (the Shekhinah) in the world above. Yet, despite these truly striking, excessively odd notions, so apparently at variance with the largely asexual idea of God in the Bible, particularly as represented by the Creation account in Genesis (which is distinguished from other Creation accounts found in the world's religions by the absence of sexuality or relations between a male deity and a female deity or consort) this esoteric teaching—admittedly held closely and taught only to the "elite"—became widely accepted, especially after the spread of Lurianic Kabbalah in the sixteenth century, even among the most conservative rabbinic elites (for example, by the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Elijah of Vilna). This became possible because these doctrines were taken as "secrets" that did not cancel out the other levels of scriptural meaning and, in particular, did not lead to antinomian consequences. Indeed, through a rich mythic theology, these emanationist and sexual notions were employed to provide a theurgical explanation of the *mitzvot* that raised—rather than threatened—their ontic status. In effect, through the possibilities created by the hermeneutics of the PaRDeS, this most uncommon kabbalistic universe was wedded, was able to be wedded, to a most traditional religious practice, thereby producing a kabbalistic Weltanschauung that was simultaneously novel, erotic—"as if one could say this"—and orthodox.

The material collected in Abu ʻAbd al-Raḥmān al-Shulamī's *Haqā'iq al tafsīr* (happily meaning "the truths of interpretation") in the early eleventh century contains almost wholly allegorical interpretations of the Qurʾān. Many of these constructions reveal Neoplatonic and other influences that derive from a conceptual schema far removed from the obvious meanings of the "clear verses" (*muhkamat*), which, according to sura 3:5–6, are "the essence of the book (Qurʾān)." Comparable to Philo's interpretation of Abraham's journeys and Bonaventure's mystical rendering of aspects of the life of Jesus, al-Sulami, for example, interprets Muhammad's *miraj* ("night journey to heaven" [sura 17:1]) as a hidden description of the mystical ascent of consciousness. Like Muhammad, the *ʻarif* (the mystical knower) gains, through this ascent, that supreme knowledge, gnosis (*ma'arifa*) that alone provides a knowledge of the unhidden Allah, in whom the self is "obliterated" in the ecstatic moments of *fana* and *baqa*. Now, this is strong theological stuff, pointing to, and deriving from, a gnostic vision not obviously present in the narrative content and legal theology of the Qurʾān. Yet, as an allegorical rendering of the *miraj*, given its link to the Prophet and his experience, it is legitimated as one, perhaps the most valuable, rendering of the Qurʾānic passage according to a theory of scriptures' multiple meanings and accepted as such by the faithful.

One has a second remarkable and profound exegetical example of this hermeneutical phenomenon in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's commentary on the Qurʾān. In comment-

ing on the Qurʾānic verse "Likewise we show Abraham the power of the heavens and the earth, that he might be one of those who are certain" (6:85), Rāzī explains the term *likewise* (*kadhalika*) as being reminiscent of the *daqiqa aqliyya* (subtle intellective realism) and interprets the passage as meaning that Allah's light shines eternally and continually connects itself to the human soul, except when separated by a veil (*hijab*). This veil is anything that draws humankind away from Allah, as, for example, idolatry does. In consequence, Abraham, in denying idolatry and rejecting his father's way, was making it possible to receive the flow of divine insight and power. As such, the term *kadhalika* in this verse means "in this manner" or "by these means"—that is, by rejecting idolatry. Still further, for Rāzī the knowledge that Abraham gains from these labors is not ordinary knowledge but a form of transcendental wisdom: "It is as if . . . he (Abraham) scanned the *malakut* (heavenly kingdom; angelic realm) with the eye of the intellect and heard with the ear of his intellect its witness as to its essential being-in-need."[70] In this brief commentary on a single verse in the Qurʾān, we find an entire complex theology of Allah's creative role; the mystical symbolism of light and the eternal light from above, to which humankind has continual access because of Allah's grace; and an understanding of knowledge (*ilm*) as a special form of mystical contemplation that eventuates in "radiance and splendor" (*ishraq wa lama'an*), and then finally in *maʿarifa* and *tawhid* (the learned confession of unity). It is not difficult to judge this Neoplatonic type of ascent in Sufi garb—in all likelihood due to the influence of Avicenna—as being far distant from the original Qurʾānic narrative. Yet the piety of its author, its passionate reverence for Allah, its love and elevation of Abraham, and its commitment to the Qurʾān as the source of ultimate wisdom—as well as Rāzī's profound knowledge of Arabic grammar, lexicography, and traditional Islamic exegesis—allow it, despite its untraditional juxtapositions, correspondences, and content, to become part of the standard retinue of Qurʾānic exegesis. The Muslim faithful—and the more intimate Sufi community—have both been persuaded to accept Rāzī's essential claim that all this material, all these luminous affirmations and allusions, are present in the text "by ways of symbols" (*ala sabil al-ramz*).

Throughout Sufi (and more generally Shi'a and Isma'ili) literature, one finds the continual invocation of the seminal claim that the Qurʾānic text has multiple interpretations. The external sense is known as the *zahr* and the internal sense is known as the *batin*, with the *batin* containing a further seven possible levels of meaning. The ultimate level of meaning, the *ta'wil*, is known only to Allah but He shares this knowledge with the mystical elite, "those who are purified." From these hermeneutical premises develops an entire elaborate theory of mystical reading, including an approach to Qurʾānic verses held to be *mutashabih* (ambiguous and capable of more than a single explanation). It was the Sufi, par excellence, who knew how to decipher these uncertain texts through the method of allegorical rendering. According to their own exegesis of the Qurʾānic verse (3:7) regarding the decipherment of the Qurʾān—"and none knows its interpretation (*ta'wil*), save only Allah and those firmly rooted in knowledge"—it is the Sufi alone who is fully rooted in the required esoteric knowledge. This rootage, this special knowledge, allowed the Sufi to perceive, and represent, all of their mystical activity as exegetical theology.

Eckhart—in an argument that closely parallels in meaning a position already introduced in the name of Ibn ʿArabī—makes this profound exegetical point: "The Holy

Spirit teaches all truth (1 John 16:13). Since the literal sense is that which the author of the writing intends, and God is the author of Holy Scripture, as has been said, then every true sense is a literal sense."[71] Now, if every true sense is a literal sense, then it is perfectly reasonable, consistent with Eckhart's Neoplatonic emanationism—*esse est Deus*[72]—to contend that the first verse in Genesis, "In the Beginning God created heaven and earth," teaches

> first the production or emanation of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father in eternity, then the production or general creation of the whole universe from the one God in time, and many of the properties of both Creator and creature.
>
> 9. You should know that in every natural action or production that is directed to what is outside the one who produces it and which implies a passage from something that is not an existing being to something that is, the principle of such production has the nature of a cause and that which is produced has the name and nature of an external effect. The first point is clear from Aristotle, who says: "A cause is that to which or from which something follows." The second point stands from the name itself. "Effect" is derived from *extra factus*, or "made outside the maker." From this it follows that what is produced in that way has the nature of something that is not an existing being to become some existing being, for example, a horse from what was not a horse, something white from what was not white. From this first conclusion regarding natural productions it is clear that in the Godhead, since every production or emanation is not directed to what is outside the producer, and is not from something that is not an existing being or from nothing, and in the third place is not directed to particular existence, what is procreated does not have the nature of something made or created and is not an effect. It is also clear that the producer does not have the nature of a creator or a cause, and that what is produced is not outside the producer and is not different from it, but is one with it. "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me" (Jn. 14:11); "The Father and I are one" (Jn. 10:30). In the Godhead the Son and the Holy Spirit are not from nothing, but are "God from God, light from light, one light, one God" with the Father. "These three are one: (1 Jn. 5:7). This is why it says here, "God created heaven and earth." Creation is a production from nothing; heaven and earth are particular beings. As we said, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not particular beings, but are simple, total, and full of existence. They are not from nothing.[73]

In this elaborate metaphysical explication we find the ground for Eckhart's theology of the unity of Being. "Whatever is outside of God . . . is nothing and does not exist." The elemental rhythm of Being is its going out and coming home. Ultimately the "spark" in the human soul "rejects all created things" and seeks "the source of this [its] essence; it wants to go into the simple ground, into the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed."[74] Reflecting on this ontological claim, one might fairly question if such a Plotinean decoding of Genesis and John is, finally, reasonable,[75] but there can be no doubt that for Eckhart—and his many disciples over the centuries—this is the authentic meaning of the Christian faith, made available by the anagogical elucidation of the biblical accounts of the world's origin. Given his mental universe and his principles of exegetical reasoning—not least his belief in the interconnectedness of scripture and philosophy—he was able to justify the finding of a capacious doctrine of emanation and return in scripture—that is, in the exegesis of scripture.

One further aspect of these considerations of PaRDeS, and of related techniques, requires separate clarification. This concerns what the medievals called parabolic

meaning. The most famous description of this mode of expression, as related to biblical literature, is provided by Maimonides in the "Introduction" to his *Guide for the Perplexed*.[76] In his observations on the nature of parables, he makes the telling comment that there are some passages whose literal meaning *is* their parabolic meaning—that is, there is no nonparabolic meaning. The "hidden" sense of the text is the meaning of the text *simpliciter*. So, for example, it is argued that Solomon, the traditional author of Proverbs, never meant his remarks about a harlot, in chapter 7, verses 6–21, to be taken at face value. He is not at all concerned in this context with an actual prostitute. Form the outset he is interested in describing the temptations that plague the flesh as a consequence of its material nature. To understand this passage otherwise is not to understand it at all.

One final observation: in the employment of all of these mystical hermeneutical gambits, in the exercise of all these forms of creative reading, one notes the continual striving to uncover an inner meaning, an essential verity, that can only be revealed by strenuous and unusual intellectual and religious exertion. The PaRDeS, and its parallels, do not constitute an easy way to paradise but an extremely strenuous form of conceptual-spiritual activity, of constructive and deconstructive interpretive explication of canonical texts, which one must work through if one is to open the transcendent gates, remove the veils of ignorance and illusion, and begin to reveal the secret of secrets.

## *Symbols and Symbolic Interpretation*

Our extended analysis of PaRDeS, and especially of allegorical forms of interpretation, requires a complementary, but distinct, analysis of the related but separate notions of "symbol" and "symbolic interpretation." Though many exegetes and students of exegesis use the two terms—*allegory* and *symbol*—synonymously, it is to be recognized that at least for certain authors and schools the two terms (and the two ideas) are not equivalent and are not simply interchangeable. The source of the difference between them lies primarily in the necessary distinction between "allegory" when it is understood as a literary technique or device—one almost wants to say an *arbitrary* literary technique or device, in which one "says one thing and means another"[77]—and "symbol" when it is understood as a nonexchangeable, nontranslatable, ontic marker.[78] Given this differentiation, an allegorical reading of, for example, the Qurʾān or the New Testament tends, even when their literal truth is insisted upon, to diminish their literal signficance—*superficie sensus litteralis*, as the medieval Catholic mystics described it—in favor of claimed, more profound, nonliteral meanings. Such a subversive employment is notable, for example, in the Christian exegesis—beginning with Paul and the New Testament authors—of the legal sections of the Torah.[79] The Jewish reading of the Law, of the individual *mitzvot* (commandments), is likened by Christian commentators to Isaac's blindness, which did not allow him "to recognize the spiritual understanding [of the Law] under the veiling cloak of the letter."[80] By the twelfth century, we find that Rupert of Deutz has gone so far as to talk of the "cheap and shoddy letters [of the Law]";[81] and Pseudo-Hugh talks of "the hidden grain beneath the pile of straw."[82] What is called "keeping the law according to the flesh"—drawing upon Paul's view that the "letter of the Law kills"—is now, in consequence

of the coming of Christ and the creation of His spiritual community, transcended. "Fleshly observance has been changed to a spiritual understanding."[83] At its very best, Jewish ritual law is an obscure, shadowy anticipation of Christian rites and ceremonies that are the signs of the "New Covenant." In consequence, the so-called ritual law of the Torah becomes simultaneously fulfilled and abrogated—it no longer binds the Christian nor dictates his or her behavior. The allegorical reading eliminates the deed biblically required.

Alternatively, the commandments of the Torah, the *mitzvot*, understood as symbols—as occurs, for example, among the medieval kabbalists—make such dissolution impossible. For, on their metaphysical rendering, the *mitzvot*, God's very own commandments, cannot be taken in any way but, at a minimum, literally—which requires their actual performance, because the commandments possess, as God's own creations, an ontological power, a supreme revelatory force, and their performance creates a moment of ultimate and irreplaceable human–divine interaction. That is, spiritual or moral values cannot substitute for obligatory physical acts insofar as these acts are understood to have been created by and revealed by the Almighty. The *mitzvot* can, of course, have additional spiritual or mystical meanings—in actuality, one would be hard-pressed to find a more extreme and elaborate theory of the supernal nature and implications of the Torah and the *mitzvot* than that proposed by the *mekubbalim* (Jewish mystics)—but its observance can never be less than obligatory. As the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* puts it: "The words of the Torah may be likened to a nut. How? Just as a nut has a shell outside and a kernel inside, so the words of Torah contain *ma'aseh*, *midrash*, *agadah*, and *sod*, one inside the other."[84] The kabbalists are most interested in the content of the fourth level, *sod* (secrets), but insist that the level of *ma'aseh* (actual deeds) is nonnegotiable and binding. In the words of the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*: "Without the *mitzvot*, the Torah is not the Torah of God."[85]

The *mitzvot*, valued as originating in God's will, are God's way to Him. They are divine channels of revealed wisdom, God's own wisdom, and the means that God Himself has established for communication between the world above and the world below. As such, they are not reducible to moral, allegorical, or other nonliteral meanings. Still further, according to the theosophical cosmic blueprint maintained by the kabbalists, each *mitzvah* was necessarily linked to one (or more) of the *sefirot* (divine attributes) and therefore directly influenced the heavenly realm. "The *mitzvot* of the Torah are all connected with the supernal, holy king."[86] What Jews do below in the keeping of the *mitzvot* directly affects what occurs in the sefirothic world above. Nothing else has, or can have, this theurgic power. The beneficial flow of the *shefa* (divine bounty) is regulated by the performance of the *mitzvot*. The immanent and transcendent struggle between good and evil both above and below is influenced by the proper, actual performance of the *mitzvot*. The upper world is united or kept divided by the performance or the nonperformance of the *mitzvot*. "The deed above is aroused by the deed below. If a man performs a deed below correctly, a power is aroused correctly in the world above."[87] Allegorical or anagogical interpretation, and mystical intention alone, is insufficient. As the Zohar describes it: "Blessing does not appear at an empty [that is, spiritualized or allegorized] place."[88] Even more striking is the Zohar's commentary on Leviticus 26: "You shall do them [the *mitzvot*]," *va-asitem otam*: "He who fulfills the commandments of the Torah . . . creates Him, as it were [*kivyachol*], in the world above. The Holy

One blessed be He says: It is as if he created Me. And they have explained this. Therefore [it is written], ‘And you shall do them.’”[89]

Such symbolic—as compared to allegorical or spiritual—interpretation, of fundamental significance in the history of religions, is found in most of the major mystical traditions of the world. Christian mystical circles insist that the crucifixion and the resurrection, for all their possible allegorical interpretations, are historical—symbolic, irreplaceable—events. Jesus did die on the cross; his blood was shed to save humankind; he did rise physically on the third day. Stressing the absolute, mandatory, importance of Jesus' earthly life and death, Erigena teaches, “Without effort he created us through his divinity; with effort he created us through his humanity.”[90] It is not sufficient, it is not acceptable, for Christians, even Christian mystics, to concentrate on what the crucifixion and resurrection mean “spiritually” if they neglect the actuality of the temporal crucifixion and resurrection. St. Anselm, meditating on these events in the life of Christ, explains, “As much as I can, though not as much as I ought, I am mindful of your passion, your buffeting, your scourging, your cross, your wounds, how you were slain for me, how you were prepared for burial and were burned.”[91] “Would that I with happy Joseph might have taken down my Lord from the cross.”[92] Indeed, the ongoing theological salience of the crucifixion and the resurrection depends, in the first instance, on their having been historical events.

This, of course, is not to deny that these acts do become what Ewert Cousins has aptly called “a mysticism of the historical event,”[93] that is, a mystical method of prayer and meditation based on Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Bonaventure's *Lignum vitae* and the anonymous *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (*Meditationes Vitae Christi*)[94] are just two of many examples of such mystical reflection and technique. But such meditation and related spiritual procedures are possible only because the particular, concrete events of Christ's life are irreplaceable symbols. So, for example, Bonaventure, whose *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (1259) is one of the major Neoplatonic works of the medieval Catholic mystical tradition, and who is no stranger to, or critic of, allegorical renderings of biblical material, feels compelled to teach:

> There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified, a love which so transformed Paul into Christ when “he was carried up to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2) that he could say: “With Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). This love also so absorbed the soul of Francis that his spirit shone through his flesh when for two years before his death he carried in his body the sacred stigmata of the passion. The six wings of the Seraph, therefore, symbolize the six steps of illumination that begin from creatures and lead up to God, whom no one rightly enters except through the Crucified. For “he who enters not through the door, but climbs up another way is a thief and a robber.” But “if anyone enter” through this door, “he will go in and out and will find pastures” (John 10:1, 9). Therefore, John says in the Apocalypse: “Blessed are they who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb that they may have a right to the tree of life and may enter the city through the gates” (Apoc. 22:14). It is as if John were saying that no one can enter the heavenly Jerusalem by contemplation unless he enter through the blood of the Lamb as through a door.[95]

The shedding of the blood of Jesus in time, on the cross, in the worldly Jerusalem of circa 30 C.E., is not a metaphor,[96] an event that can be wholly allegorized. It can be the stuff of allegory, but only because it is, first and foremost, an irreplaceable historical-

ontological reality. As the Dominican Johannes Tauler—the most influential medieval German Catholic mystic,[97] after Eckhart—taught, with a concentrated eye on the humanity of Christ and the historicity of the Passion: “No one can pass beyond the example set to us by Our Lord Jesus Christ.”[98]

The entire tradition of *Amor Carnalis Christi* must also be given its due,[99] as part and parcel of this Christian spiritual totality, for, as Erigena insisted: “Divina non mendax . . . historia” (biblical history does not lie).[100] Likewise, the Marian piety that becomes so developed in the late medieval era represents this type of historical-ontic facticity in yet another form. Mary can be allegorized and spiritualized in all the wondrous senses connected with mothers and motherhood and mothering, but always the Catholic faithful must return to a view of Mary as the simple girl of first-century Palestine. As Tauler says at the outset of his sermon on the “Feast of Our Lady’s Nativity”: “Today we celebrate the lovely feast on which the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, was born, free from sin, immaculate and holy from her mother’s womb . . .”[101] Her Virgin Birth, the anunciation, her pregnancy, the birth of Jesus, her pain over his death, and her subsequent devotion provide the foundation for all later, grander claims for her as Queen of Heaven, mediatrix, the object of devotion in the liturgical Marian feasts, and for her putative appearances at various loci that became special shrines at which she was venerated.

The Catholic diagnosis of the Mass provides a paradigmatic insight into what is at stake in the difference between allegorical and symbolic exemplification. The sanctified wine and bread, representing the blood and body of Jesus, cannot be replaced by intellectual, spiritual, or moral appreciation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It cannot be performed only “mentally”; its soteriological purpose cannot be accomplished by its allegorical or spiritual nonperformance. The holy *realia* of the ritual of the Eucharist constitute the literal meeting point of the present dialogue between Christ and the faithful. Jesus’ words and actions, which provide the basis for this central ritual, “This is my body. . . . This is my blood” (Matthew 26:26–28), are translated into symbols—not allegories—through which the believer experiences transcendence and salvation. This act is not solely or wholly, or even primarily, an act of contemplation—though it can secondarily be seen and responded to in this way, as has been recommended by many distinguished interpreters in, for example, the Eastern Orthodox Community—but is, rather, a “magical” act in which material objects that cannot be replaced are mysteriously transformed into substances that participate directly and unequivocally in the divinity of Christ. Sacramental participation in this cardinal mystery rite is the entranceway to otherwordly life and bliss. To participate in the Mass is to gain Christ’s grace, made possible by his death, which is now inexplicably but actually reenacted. Jesus is here present in the wine and bread.[102] The power of the Mass functions *ex opere operato*. So powerful, indeed, is it that it even benefits the dead; hence the tradition of the votive Mass—and the many cases of miracles connected to it.[103]

Similarly, the obligations imposed by the Qurʾān, and the sacrificial and ritual traditions of Hinduism, have been understood by the mystical teachers of these traditions as possessing the same sort of symbolic integrity that has been described vis-à-vis Kabbalah and medieval Christian mystical doctrine. The performance of *yajña* (the sacrifice), the offering of the drinkable soma over the holy fire (*agni*), which repre-

sents *prāṇa* (the vital energy force in the universe)—accompanied by the correct formulas (*yaju*s) and hymns (*stotra*s)—and through which the performer is purified and gains immortality, is not a metaphorical act, a behavior that is to be reduced to an allegorical meaning. Rather, it is an essential doing, the performing of which purifies and ennobles the self so that it can eventually become one with Brahman, the Ultimate One/Self. This metaphysical activity is repeated throughout the year—and one's life—by the Hindu in an elaborate round of rituals and sacrifices that are held to be soteriologically efficacious. Maṇḍana Mi'sra, Śaṅkara's seventh-century Advaitan contemporary (or disciple?),[104] argues, in his important *Brahmasiddhi*, that false appearances are removed by sacrifices (as taught by the Vedas) "in some unseen (*adṛṣṭa*) manner. Or else, as others say, sacrifice and the like accomplish their purpose by destroying impurities (*kalusa*) that get in the way of the highest good (*sreyas*); for the purpose of obligatory rites (*nityakarman*) is the washing away (*kṣaya*) of sins."[105] Neither faith, no matter how intense, nor psychological or subjective factors—paralleling the allegorical reading—can replace the actual fire, the drinkable soma, and the magical *yaju*s, *saman*s (songs), and *stotra*s. *Yajña* (the Vedically prescribed sacrifice) has an intrinsic connection with the transcendental world, the nature of which cannot be duplicated or replaced by alternative acts of consciousness or, for example, moral behavior. It has restorative and salvific consequences for both the individual who performs the ritual—or has it performed for him—and the cosmic order as a whole. The gods and cosmic forces are themselves influenced by it. Though the state of *Brahmabhāva*—being in the state of Brahman or one with Brahman—is complemented by acts associated with the state of *Brahmacārya*, it is not simply equivalent to it and the latter cannot replace the former. Faith and good works cannot substitute for the globally consequential power (*prabhāva*) of the *yajña* and the mysterious theurgical efficacy of the verbal ritual-liturgical forms that accompany it. All of this ritual activity is entailed by the canonical literature of the tradition, particularly the Vedas, and therefore the Hindu spiritual adepts know they are bound by these sacrificial processes that no interpretive schema can explain away. They may use the sacred texts as pretexts for many things, but they are not free to turn the symbol into an idea, to reduce the sacrifice to an act of consciousness, essential as the transformation of consciousness is in this religious matrix.

In this context one also has to integrate the significance of the practice of reciting mantras. I have discussed this subject elsewhere,[106] and I therefore will not deal with it at length here, except that I should reaffirm the power of the mantra as such—that is, a power putatively embedded in the recitation of the Sanskrit sounds per se. The meaning of a mantra lies in its performance—a position with which even Śaṅkara agrees, in his commentary on the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, relative to the mantra *OM*. That he does so is significant evidence that must be factored into the overall equation in trying to reach a balanced understanding of how Hindu masters understand what the prescriptions of sacred texts entail.

Parenthetically, I also go farther to argue that though Śaṇkara and his disciples are regularly presented by scholars East and West as holding an essentially metatextual theological position that denigrates the obligatory performance of Hindu ritual, Śaṅkara himself would reject this characterization of his doctrinal claims—and this because his monism is the consequence of a searching conceptual analysis of the Vedas and

the Upaniṣads, and not the end product of a direct and unmediated mystical experience. Śaṅkara's entire system, which, not for nothing, is technically described as *Advaita Vedānta*, results, as he would insist, from exegesis, not experience. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find any evidence that Śaṇkara ever experienced the oneness he extols. Instead, this oneness is an ideal arrived at by arguing logically and otherwise about what certain Vedic and Upaniṣadic texts mean—it does not result from actual ecstatic moments in which Ātman is Brahman. (This circumstance is closely paralleled in the history of Kabbalah, wherein experiential reports, as compared to exegetical glosses and theoretical constructs, are very rare, as well as in the large corpus of Sufi writings that, on the whole, are considerably reticent about describing personal ecstatic experiences.[107] It is also distinctly paralleled in the history of Christian mysticism, though in this tradition experiential reports are more common. But even in this setting, one needs to go a step farther and understand that such reports represent, have the nature of, a stylized form of narrative in this tradition.)

In reflecting on these claims for *mitzvot* that are made by kabbalists, the claims regarding the life and death of Jesus and the Mass by medieval Catholic mystics, the role of *yajña*s and mantras in Hinduism—and, by extension, aspects of Sufi teaching about Qurʾānic doctrine and *ādāb* (rules of correct behavior)—one recognizes the truth of M. D. Chenu's observation on the nature of symbolic interpretation in the medieval era: "To bring symbolism into play was not to extend or supplement a previous act of the reason; it was to give primary expression to a reality which reason could not conceptualize."[108] The symbolic can be found everywhere in religious environments but it is present nowhere more than in the thought and teaching of the great mystical masters. For them it was an essential mode of being, a necessary form of decipherment, a discrete method of metaconceptualization and, to the degree possible, a required type of explanation. The "symbol," the symbolic modality—and the theurgical and magical possibilities they open up—comprise a fundamental channel of divine teaching through which humankind learns, glimpses, the irreducible Beyond.

### *Typology, or Metonymy*

As a complement to the allegorical and symbolic readings, there is the separate method of interpretation known as typology, or metonymy. Here an individual or an event is not read simply as referring to, or standing for, something else (that is, *X* understood to mean *Y*), as in allegorical situations, but rather, the event or individual at issue is conceived of as a model, type, or sign of a specific sort of activity or characteristic that repeats itself, which thereby means that the future will be like the past and that the past prefigures the future. Quintilian, in his *Institutes of Oratory*, already observed that "metonymy . . . consists in the substitution of one name for another, and as Cicero tells us, is called *hypallagē* (exchange) by the rhetoricians."[109] Employing such an understanding, the Hebrew Prophets saw the Exodus, for example, as a sign of God's redemptive power, which would manifest itself again in the future redemption. "On that day, the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time [the Exodus having been the first] to recover the remnant of the people."[110] The saving God still saves.

The most essential implication of this hermeneutical method is summed up in a famous rabbinic maxim: "What occurred to the Fathers will occur to the sons."[111] A

teaching glossed by Nachmanides—arguably the greatest medieval Jewish mystical Bible commentator—is as follows:

> I will tell you a principle by which you will understand all the coming portions of Scripture concerning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is indeed a great matter which our Rabbis mentioned briefly, saying: "Whatever has happened to the patriarchs is a sign to the children." It is for this reason that the verses narrate at great length the account of the journeys of the patriarchs, the digging of the wells, and other events. Now, someone may consider them unnecessary and of no useful purpose, but in truth they all serve as a lesson for the future: when an event happens to any one of the three patriarchs, that which is decreed to happen to his children can be understood. . . . It is for this reason that the Holy One, blessed be He, caused Abraham to take possession of the Land and symbolically did to him all that was destined to happen in the future to his children. Understand this principle. Now, with the help of G-d, I will begin to explain in detail the subject matter of the verses.[112]

*Mekubbalim* know that history, especially the history of the Jewish people, is not the result of accidents. It reflects and reveals an encompassing, providential plan that is organized according to a stylized pattern of divine initiatives and responses. As such, the past is the pointer to the future if the past, in keeping with its deep mystical structure, is properly comprehended. In its totality, history is the enactment and reenactment of transcendental purposes.

In similar fashion, the fundamental theological premise of Christianity, regarding its relation to Judaism, was its belief that the events described in the Hebrew Bible, the so-called Old Testament, "prefigure" those in the New Testament, and that the prophecies of the former are fulfilled in the latter. So Cain is the synagogue; Abel, the church. So Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, Leah and Rachel, Manasseh and Ephraim, Eli and Samuel, Saul and David are all, respectively, "typologically," the old and new covenants. So Jesus is a new Adam,[113] the sacrificial Isaac,[114] and a superior Moses.[115] His death and resurrection repeat the salvific act fo the Exodus.[116] His temptations repeat Israel's trials in the desert.[117] He is the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53. In sum, the most important prophecies of the Hebrew Bible are directed to the future and for the sake of an event yet to happen—the life and death of Jesus. In Paul's phrase, Jesus "is the yes pronounced upon God's promises, every one of them" (2 Cor. 1:20). God's revelations in the past are for the sake of the Christian future. "The time is fulfilled" (Mark 1:15). Augustine clearly and paradigmatically described this interconnection: "In the Old Testament the new lies hid; in the New Testament the meaning of the Old becomes clear."[118] And Jerome made it a rule of his exegesis: "Let us follow the rule that all the prophets did much that was typical of our Lord . . . and whatever at the actual time happened concerning Jeremiah was a prophecy of the future concerning the Lord."[119] Developing this argument, Hilary, in his *Tractatus Mysteriorum*, wrote: "Christ begets the Church, . . . redeems it by true authentic prefigurations through the whole course of this world's history: in the sleep of Adam, in the flood of Noah, . . . the justification of Abraham. Everything which Christ would fulfill had then been prefigured since the beginning of the world" (1.1).[120] In any event, such typological readings are found in nearly all the major patristic authors; and through the work of Justin, Melito of Sardis, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Ambrose, Hilary, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, Basil, Cyril of Alexandria, Cyprian, and

Augustine, it becomes a standard form of medieval Christian scriptural interpretation—mystical and nonmystical alike.

What is particularly significant about typological analyses, as against simply allegorical ones, is that they do not dissolve the concreteness of the (primarily) historical terms or events—for example, the Exodus or the Passion—being deciphered and compared. Indeed, it is essential to the metonymic model that the individual names of persons and events be retained to both individuate them and make possible a linear analysis. In such an interpretive schema, event A or person B is said to be like event X or person Y, and both A and X and B and Y are explicated as being part of a coherent, often historical, series that is tied together by an overarching value or principle, for example, Divine Love, Providence, God's redemptive power, or the power of evil. As a result, such exegesis differs from and negates (to varying degrees from case to case) the spiritualizing tendency found, for example, in the extreme allegorizing of Origen and his many heirs. Typology—if I may be allowed a certain simplification—compares (and contrasts) events and people, while allegory compares (and contrasts) disembodied metaphysical archetypes.

Kabbalists, and other Jewish exegetes, employed this mode of interpretation but less often and less centrally than did Christian scholars. The reason for this asymmetry lies in the differing historical-theological situations in which Jewish and Christian students of the Bible found themselves—that is, Jewish scholars did not have to find connections between two testaments and, therefore, had less need of such an interpretive procedure. Yet, insofar as they looked to the Bible for indications of Israel's future, of God's presence and activity in the ongoing life of the Jewish people, even in exile—and hopefully of Israel's final redemption and return to the Land of Israel—typology was a useful method of interpretation. So, for example, Esau is Rome for the Talmudic sages. And regarding Esau, Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai taught: "It is an axiom [that] Esau hates Jacob."[121] This is *the* explanation of anti-Jewish sentiment, and Jews need to have no illusions on this matter. The future is like the past. Again, the book of Daniel's typology of the fourth wicked kingdom was applied by the Talmudic sages to Rome,[122] by medieval Jews in Christian countries to Christendom, and by Jews in Muslim countries to Ishmael and the world of Islam.[123] Similarly, Nachmanides, in interpreting Jacob's encounter with Esau after many years (recounted in Gen. 32:4), links Jacob's actions on this occasion with the fall of the later Hasmonean state to Rome:

> Since the southern part of the Land of Israel adjoins Edom, and Jacob's father *dwelt in the land of the South*, he had to pass through Edom or near there. Therefore, he feared lest Esau hear of it, and he took the initiative by sending messengers to him in his country. But the Sages have already taken him to task for this, saying in Bereshith Rabbah: *"Like one that taketh a dog by the ears is he that he passeth by, and meddleth with a strife not his own*. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Jacob, "Esau was going his way, and you send him messengers, and say to him, *Thus saith thy servant Jacob!*'"
>
> In my opinion this too hints at the fact that we instigated our falling into the hand of Edom [Rome] for the Hasmonean kings during the period of the Second Temple, entered into a covenant with the Romans, and some of them even went to Rome to seek an alliance. This was the cause of their falling into the hands of the Romans. This is mentioned in the words of our Rabbis, and is well publicized in books.[124]

Furthermore, Jacob's plan to divide his camp (so that in case of an attack some of his family might survive) is indicative of Israel's history during the Exile:

> The intent of this is that Jacob knew that all his seed would not fall into Esau's hands. Therefore, in any case, one camp would be saved. This also implies that the children of Esau will not formulate a decree against us designed to obliterate our name entirely, but they will do evil to some of us in some of their countries. One of their kings will formulate a decree in his country against our wealth or our persons while simultaneously another king will show compassion in his place and save the refugees. And so the Rabbis said in Bereshith Rabbah: "*If Esau come to the one camp and smite it*—these are our brethren in the south. *Then the camp which is left shall escape*—these are our brethren in the Diaspora." Our Rabbis thus saw that this chapter alludes also to the future generations.[125]

Nor is Nachmanides' use of typology unique. Although, as noted, it was a minor trope among Jewish exegetes in comparison to allegory more generally understood, it was utilized effectively by, for example, Isaac ben Joseph Ha-Kohen in his fifteenth-century commentary on the Book of Ruth, and by a variety of late-medieval Jewish rationalist and kabbalistic biblical commentators. As Frank Talmage notes regarding Joseph Ha-Kohen's *Ruth*:

> There the book of Ruth is read as a prefiguration of the future history of Israel, and its characters are types (*mashal*) of those yet to come—Elimelech of the House of David, Naomi of the kingdom of Israel, Ruth of the faithful tribes of Judah and Benjamin, Orpah of the wayward ten tribes who followed Jeroboam, and so forth.[126]

The Zohar, too, despite its emphasis on theosophical forms of meaning, its concern with the secrets of the sefirothic realm and humankind's relationship to this esoteric domain, also employs typological readings. For example, it sees, in the very odd tale of Lot and his daughters, a prefiguration of the action of Ruth and Boaz that, through the special direction of heaven, eventuates in the Messiah.

> In regard to the names Moab and Ammon, R. Jose made the following comment. "The first-born daughter was bold-faced enough to call her son 'Moab,' thereby proclaiming that he was *meab*, i.e., the issue of her own father; whereas "the younger she also bore a son, and called his name Ben-Ammi": the mother out of delicacy gave him that name which being interpreted simply means "a son of my people," without betraying who his father was. Further, the words "and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose" occur twice in this passage, first in reference to the younger daughter, and then in reference to the elder. In the former case the word *b'qumah* (when she arose) occurring in it is *plene*, i.e., with the letter *vav*, which, moreover, is provided with a dot; this is to signify that heaven, as it were, was an accomplice to the act which ultimately was to bring about the birth of the Messiah. Contrariwise, the similar word in reference to the younger one is written defectively, without the letter *vav*, for the reason that none of her issue had any part in the Holy One, blessed He. R. Simeon said: "The underlying meaning of the words 'and he knew not' is that he was unaware that the Holy One intended to raise from her King David and Solomon and all the other kings and, finally, the Messiah." R. Simeon said further: "The expression 'when she arose' has its counterpart in the words used by Ruth, 'And she rose up before one could discern another' (Ruth 3:14). For it was on that day that Lot's daughter could be said to have risen to the height of her destiny in that [p. 3a] Boaz became attached to one of her lineage in order 'to raise up the name of the

dead upon his inheritance,' by means of which there were raised from her all those kings and the elect of Israel. Again, 'And he knew not when she lay down' has its counterpart in the verse, 'And she lay at his feet until the morning.'" (Ibid.).[127]

In this gloss, the Zohar, through its exoteric hermeneutics, is able to tease out, through the spelling of words used in Genesis, the future course of the families that were descended from Lot's double act of incest, through Ruth and Boaz, and that culminated in the royal line from which would derive the future Redeemer. This is not an accidental or contingent chain of genealogical descent but one in which a deep mystery abides, one in which "heaven, as it were, was an accomplice."

I resist the temptation here to provide examples of similar forms of typological exegesis found in Islamic and other mystical traditions. I add, however, one last, more general, observation regarding typology as a form of mystical scriptural exegesis: such expositions are premised on the hermeneutical-*cum*-metaphysical assumption that historical reality is governed by transcendental forces and moves forward toward a more-than-historical teleology, even if it does so, in Eckhart's phrase, *innuit quasi latenter*, that is, obscurely and darkly. As a result, to engage in such textual study and analysis, to attempt to unpack these dense theosophical *midrashim*, is not only to seek to know the basic design of the created order but also, and still more, to seek out the One/It who/which is responsible for this design.

### *Paradox*

A favored exegetical and descriptive technique of mystical authors is the use of paradox. In employing it, mystics do not believe themselves to be making propositions that are simply logically contradictory—that is, their utilization of such unusual locutions is not merely the result of intellectual ineptitude and linguistic sloppiness. Rather, paradoxes are understood as contradictions that result from holding to two true propositions that do not agree, while the disagreement between them cannot be resolved in any rational manner. To avoid a longer analysis of this conception of paradox, I remind readers that this is the classical definition resorted to, for example, by the church to defend its various Christological formulations of the Incarnation and the Trinity,[128] notions that, by definition, are claimed to ultimately defy logic and transcend the ordinary categories of grammar and language.

In trying to give voice to what are regularly claimed to be truths beyond language, mystics find that paradoxes, because of their unconventionality, are a valuable tool. To the degree that they break accepted linguistic and logical rules, they are seen as a fit vehicle for religious language insofar as such language relates to God and other Ultimate Objects or Subjects—*al Haqq, Ens Realisimum, Nicht, Mu, Esse, Eyn Sof, Nirvāṇa, Śūnyatā, Brahman*—that, by definition, cannot be captured in standard discourse or limited and explained according to the laws of logic.

Understanding this first principle that governs the employment of paradoxes reveals the further truth that mystics (and scholars) utilize the deviant language of paradox to indicate the metastatus of the referents of such language—that is, such language is not meant as a literal description of the metalinguistic, metalogical ultimate realities but as a way of "signing" them. As such, despite the use of language in such circumstances, paradox shares, a priori, the hermeneutical premises of the *via negativa*—

that no predicates properly apply to God or the Ultimate *X*—and of apophatic theology more generally: for any (proposition or attribute) *Y*, *X* (the ultimate reality) is not *X*. (For, according to their governing principles, to predicate anything of God or of the Ultimate *X* would be to limit and thereby diminish God or the Ultimate *X*.) In the language of Hinduism, one can only say, *nety, nety*, (not this, not this). Which is to recognize that paradoxes do not make substantive ontological pronouncements. Rather, they indicate, by a sort of indirection, that there is an ultimate reality whose being/Being is more than this or that, more than a single category, or many categories, can capture, and which can be known, if it can be known at all, only through forms other than ordinary linguistic forms and logical categories.[129] As Erigena argued, in defense of terms such as *superessentialis*: "[A term such as this is permissible] for it says that God is not one of the things that are but that he is more than the things that are, but what that 'is' is, it in no way defines."[130]

Mention of Erigena reminds us that this use of paradoxical formulations is deeply embedded in the Western intellectual tradition, especially that part of it that is connected to, and emanates from, Neoplatonism. In particular, the paradoxical pronouncements of, and support for, a radical *via negativa* by Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite—so-called because this fifth–sixth-century author was confused with the figure mentioned in Acts 17:34—exerted an enormous influence on medieval Christian mystical tradition. For it was Pseudo-Dionysius who taught what would become the much recycled doctrine of an ultimate *extasis* beyond *panta ouk onta aki onta* (being and nonbeing), *pros tēn hyperousion tou theiou* (in accordance with the essence of God).[131] Gregory the Great; John Scotus Erigena, who translated Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin in 862; Hugh of St. Victor, who edited two commentaries on the celestial hierarchy between 1125 and 1137; Richard of St. Victor; Bernard of Clairvaux; Isaac of Stella; Bonaventure; Eckhart; Tauler; Ruysbroeck; Nicholas of Cusa; Cisneros; Francis of Osuna; and John of the Cross—all draw upon him, as did a host of Renaissance Platonists led by Pico dello Mirandola and Ficino. Repeatedly, Christian mystics, as well as kabbalists and Sufis, turned to this strategy of using paradoxical formulations to indicate *that* God was, but not *what* God was. (And as noted in the following discussion, a parallel approach was widely adopted in the major Eastern mystical traditions.)[132]

Frank Tobin, commenting on Eckhart's German sermon on the "poverty of spirit" ("Beati pauperes spiritu"),[133] provides a helpful first example of one type of paradoxical formulation. He notes that Eckhart urges us

> to beg God to rid us of God. God can be known to us in any positive way only through what he brings about. But as the cause of creatures God does not reveal himself as he really is. Creatures are too far from him, are in the region of dissimilarity. In knowing God as the cause of creatures, we grasp something that is little more than an arbitrary sing of the reality. By getting rid of this sign, by realizing through negative attribution that our notion of God contains hardly a hint of his true nature, we pass—paradoxically—to a better understanding of the God who is hidden from us.[134]

Only through the paradoxicality of negation can one provide meaning to God-language. The structure of things, the Godliness of God—that is, His essential nature, whatever and however it is, such as it is—creates this phenomenological circumstance that cannot

be overcome. In consequence, Eckhart, in trying to think through the relationship of human speech to God's true nature, reflects on Augustine's famous position on this problem—in his *On Christian Doctrine* (1.6)—as follows:

> Augustine says "All writings are in vain. If one says that God is a word, he has been expressed (*gesprochen*); but if one says that God is unspoken (*ungesprochen*), he is ineffable (*unspechlich*)." And yet he is something, but who can speak this word? No one can do this, except him who is this Word. God is a Word that speaks itself. Wherever God is, he speaks this Word; wherever he is not, he does not speak. God is spoken and unspoken.[135]

In this highly peculiar, very difficult teaching, Eckhart is trying to convey something of the truth of God's presence, despite acknowledging our human incapacity, that is made possible by God's own mysterious nature that necessarily makes Itself known. In reflecting on the possible interpretation of this strange formulation, it is helpful to appreciate that Eckhart's language—his use of elaborate paradoxical constructions that involve positing positive and negative attributions to the divine—does not function as language functions in, for example, Zen *kōan*s, in which case language is pushed to such an extreme that it ceases to operate altogether. Instead, Eckhart utilizes language to indicate something of transcendental reality—of God's nature and speech—that must be "known" but cannot be known; that must be expressed but cannot be expressed in ordinary language; that *is* but whose "*isness*" is unlike that of any other reality.

From this starting point, Eckhart proceeds to demand that "whoever sees anything of God sees nothing of God";[136] that "if we really understood how creatures flow out [of God] yet remain within [God], it would not be true";[137] that "the more he [God] is in things, the more he is outside of things"[138] (a recycling of the old Neoplatonic paradox of *totus intus, totus foris*);[139] and that if God is being (*wesen*), then the proper description of God is "a being above being,"[140] or, perhaps still better, "a being without being" (*ein wesen weselôs*). Supporting and advancing his theological and metaphysical views through the use of his paradoxes, together with the additional stylistic devices of negation and the *via negativa*, antithesis—the contrasting of opposites—and the use of chiasmus, Eckhart strives to convey that mystical insight, "unknowing knowledge,"[141] which is, by its inherent nature (assertedly) supralogical and beyond the boundaries and limits of phenomenal reality.[142] In so doing he seeks to use language to make plain the incapacity of language to deal with the transcendent, and, at the same time, the necessity, however contradictory, to struggle to do just this.

What is particularly interesting is that Eckhart attempts this logically impossible possibility more often than not in the context of interpreting a biblical teaching. For example, in his *Commentary on Wisdom*, explicating his views on the crucial dialectic of God's immanence and transcendence, he writes: "Everything which is distinguished by indistinction is the more distinct the more indistinct it is, because it is distinguished by its own indistinction. Conversely, it is the more indistinct the more distinct it is, because it is distinguished by its own distinction from what is indistinct."[143] While on the central issue of the Word in the opening of John's Gospel—a theme to which Eckhart returns again and again, and which provides a basis for his cardinal doctrine that *deus est intelligere*—he expresses himself in this grand para-

doxical formulation: "When the Father gave birth to all creatures, he gave birth to me, and I flowed out with all the creatures, and yet remain within in the Father. Just like the word I now utter: It arises within me; second, I abide upon its image; third, I utter it forth, and all of you discern it; yet it actually remains in me. Just so have I remained in the Father." (The full force of Eckhart's "illogical" argument, of his strange construal of the nature of the Word, is conveyed most powerfully through his own highly idiosyncratic German: "Do der vater gebor alle creaturen, do gebor er mich, und ich cloz uz mit allen creaturen und bleip doch inne in dem vater. Ze glicher wis, als daz wort, daz ich nu spriche, daz entspringet in mir, ze dem andern male so ruowe ich uf dem bilde, ze dem dritten male so spriche ich ez uz, und ir enpfahet ez alle; nochdenne blibet ez eigenliche in mir. Also bin ich in dem vater bliben.")[144] Insofar as the Bible is God's own speech, we must seek to understand its meaning—here the meaning of the Word—and in order to do so we are authorized to speak of that which the Bible speaks. Had God not spoken of these matters—of the birth of the Word and its emanation—we could not speak of them at all. However, God's speech being polysemous, and its subjects transcendental, it reveals something of the mystery of His relation to the Word but in a manner that always escapes full human comprehension. God's speech as in, for example, his revelation allows us an awareness of transcendental realia—without it we would be largely bereft of knowledge of God—but God reveals Himself in such a way, through paradoxes and negation, that we are constantly reminded not to mistake that which we do comprehend for the totality of that which is to be comprehended. The Bible and other scriptures, as these are read by mystical masters like Eckhart, are seen to make present the numinous, the transcendent, and the mysterious, without presenting strong, structured conceptualizations of these dimensions of being/Being.

For Eckhart, the Bible is a book of secrets, and the key to understanding it is an awareness that it reveals ultimate truths while concealing them and conceals them while revealing them. In commenting on it, as he repeated does, he wishes to convey the unconveyable by speaking of *X* and then denying *X*, leaving some trace of the meaning of *X* while not describing *X*. Through simultaneously affirming *X* and denying *X*, paradoxical language, in his understanding of it, paradoxically gives some direction toward which to look for *X* but does not picture *X* or literally attribute qualities or characterstics of *X*, though paradoxically the indescribability of the absolute becomes, in an inverted way, a description.

At the same time, Eckhart also wishes to use language as a medium of and for spiritual transformation, through which the reader/hearer will undergo a change of perspective, an alteration of consciousness, a modification in one's belief, a revolution in one's experience of the divine.

Eckhart's use of paradoxical formulations, and his motivations for using them, are, of course, phenomena he shares with many (indeed most) medieval Christian mystics, especially as they attempt to plumb the depths of scripture. For example, Isaac of Stella talks of the "unapproachable light . . . [that] itself produces our darkness";[145] and he proposes that if "we wish to speak about the Ineffable, about whom nothing can be properly said, it is necessary to be silent, or to use altered terms."[146] Commenting on the seraphim spoken of in Isaiah 6:2 he preaches:

> No wonder the seraphim, for all their holiness and towering nature and those wings that indicate the soaring of contemplation, are seen to cover their face and feet. It was to teach us that it was not their own ignorance that kept the beginning and the end from them; it was God's fathomless superwisdom. Just as by seeing nothing we behold invisible darkness, and by hearing nothing we hearken to inaudible silence, so, by neither seeing nor enduring the Light that is more than superabounding and cannot be borne, we do see the Invisible, not as blind men, but as those conquered by the Light.[147]

Likewise, Richard of St. Victor analyzes the cherubim over the ark as symbols of the coincidence of opposites—God is active-passive, light-darkness, revealed-hidden, like-unlike, a reality that ordinary reason cannot comprehend but that, in the higher awareness of mystical intelligentsia, becomes united and understood.[148] Again, in explicating the Gospel of John 1:5, Hadewijch writes: "The accident of multiplicity takes from us our singleness; as Saint John the Evangelist said: 'The light shines in the darkness and the dark darkness does not understand the clarity of the light shining in her.'"[149] Mechthild of Magdeburt, reflecting on the biblical conceptions of sin and finitude, praises alienation from God (*gotzvrömedunge*), claims that the more she accepts this alienation the closer God comes to her[150]—*Mere ie sich tieffer sinke, ie ich süsser trinke*[151] (the more I sink, the more I drink [of God]). And Tauler speaks of the *grundelos grunt* (the groundless ground); he also speaks of the Trinity as the imageless image;[152] of God who "becomes and unbecomes"; of him (the mystical soul) who "has died and is decreated (*entworden*), to him the Father is revealed."[153] To make sense, however oblique, of the mysteries revealed through God's revelation in the Bible, one must forgo, transcend, that which is regularly identified as sense, and the forms of language and logic that define this delimiting standard of intelligibility. Paradox—and negation resulting in paradox—are the signs of transcendence when transcendence is "perceived" by human beings from below.

John of the Cross, in chapter 8 of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in explaining that "no creature or knowledge comprehensible to the intellect can serve as a proximate means for the divine union with God," tells us: "In order to draw nearer the divine ray, the intellect must advance by unknowing rather than by the desire to know, and by blinding itself and remaining in darkness rather than by opening the eyes."[154] In offering this gloss, John of the Cross emphasizes still another meaning of paradoxical utterances: the purpose of using language and paradox in the mystical context is not to present an objective description, and not even a nondescriptive description, or a trace, à la Eckhart, but rather to testify to an experience—which John labels a "wound," a "burn," a "spark," a "flame of love" in the soul—and to mark out the path, set out most clearly in scripture, to that experience. The usefulness of paradoxical formulations lies in their unique ability to lead the reader/hearer/seeker into contact with the mystery of the Ultimate. "This knowing which is unknown . . . is of such high excellence, this supreme knowing . . . and his knowledge so increase, that he is left unknowing."[155] The object of such discourse is not the transmission of an idea, the sharing of some form of gnosis, but rather the remaking of the reader/hearer/seeker as an appropriate partner for an intense, overwhelming love affair with God. There is no more efficacious way to accomplish this transformation than through an encounter with the divine enigmas of scripture. As John explains regarding biblical mysteries:

> The spirit and life is perceived by souls who have ears for it, those souls, as I say that are cleansed and enamored. . . . Those who do not relish this language [that] God speaks within them must not think on this account that others do not taste it; St. Peter tasted it in his soul when he said to Christ, "Lord, where shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" [John 6:69]. And the Samaritan women forgot the water and the water pot because of the sweetness of God's words [John 4:28]. Since this soul is so close to God, it is transformed into a flame of love, in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are communicated to it.[156]

This transcendental communion, however, is very special, so special in fact that *no* human knowledge can lead to it. God is not accessible to human beings on our terms, through our wisdom, as a consequence of our way of knowing. Rather, God, the incomprehensible, reaches out to humankind in a supreme act of grace and lets His unknowability be "tasted" through His love rather than through our wholly inadequate comprehension. For this reason, given this metaphysical circumstance, to indicate such extraordinary Divine activity, to speak of it even though it is "incomprehensible," one can but use paradoxical constructions.

The diverse use of paradoxes as a preferred literary-religious form is also widely found in Sufism. Junayd, for example, in developing his theory of the preexistence of the soul and the final goal of mystical ascent, employs locutions such as the searching after the condition in which the soul is "as [it] was when [it] was before [it] was."[157] Again he describes the moment of ecstasy, of *fana*, extinction of the self, as a moment in which Allah "annihilated me in generating me as he had originally generated me in the state of my annihilation."[158] Likewise, in poetically explicating the Qurʾānic tale of Iblis's (Satan's) refusal to bow before Adam, al-Ḥallāj tells us, "I have attained certitude that distance and nearness are one."[159] Ibn ʿArabī's description of mystical witnessing (*shahada*) is put mysteriously as follows: "When I witness, O!—the-one-who-has-no-likeness / Guidance and error are the same to me."[160] Indeed, in a not too extended sense, much of Ibn ʿArabī's corpus can be classified as both exegetical in character and paradoxical in form. The four volumes of Ibn ʿArabī's commentary on specific verses and suras, compiled and published by Mahmud Ghurab, reveal both of these characteristics very clearly. Take, as an example, his theosophical-exegetical reflection on Qurʾān 19:86, "And he pushes criminals." Ibn ʿArabī explains the verse as follows:

> He pushes those who deserve that toward which they are being pushed, by means of the wind from the west [*rîh al-dabur*], with which he makes them die unto themselves. He seizes them by their forelocks and the wind—which is only their own passions—pushes them toward Gehenna, toward the separation [*al-buʿd*, "distance"] that they imagined. But when he has thus pushed them toward this place, they in fact arrive at proximity. The [illusory] distance ceases, as does, for them, that which is called "Gehenna" [*musammâ jahannam*, Gehenna retains its name—*ism*—but that which was "named" (*musammâ*) by this name, namely, an abyss, a place of exile, has changed its nature].[161]

Allah's love is such that He transforms all relationships with humankind according to a rule of divine mercy. In applying this rule, according to Ibn ʿArabī, Allah's actions and their consequences create an alternative reality to the one that is usually imagined as existing. The alienation (*al-buʿd*) from the Divine that sin, "their own passion," causes does not lead to a distant Gehenna, but paradoxically, because of

His compassion, brings men back to their Creator. What is particularly interesting about this reading is that Ibn ʿArabī, through his systemic, paradoxical exegesis of this single Qurʾānic verse, posits, and relies upon, the following inversions or transformations: distance = closeness; judgment = compassion; Divine causation = human sin; death = life external; separation = proximity; Gehenna = heaven; exile = return. Things are not what they appear to be; the correctly decoded meaning of reality is not the superficial meaning we regularly claim to apprehend. Paradoxes for Ibn ʿArabī, and nearly the whole of the Sufi tradition, are intended to help us recognize this truth and to point us away from the limited and the mundane to the unlimited *al haqq*.

In the rich mystical traditions of India, Japan, and China, similar types of textual investigation and interpretive techniques have a continual and repercussive presence. Consider, for example, the character of Zen *kōan*s (and *mondo*s) that present classic mystical paradoxes, if of a special sort, generated from within a very particular ontological mapping of reality and human consciousness. Based on the claim that language is wholly inadequate for describing and translating the truth of *nirvāṇa*, and the way to *nirvāṇa*, Zen took to using language primarily in a performative way. The *kōan* does not "mean" anything; its purpose is to break the bonds of normal consciousness and thereby permit the gaining of a different sort of consciousness, which might be capable of achieving *samādhi*, *prajñā*, and *nirvāṇa*.

Consistent with this position, "Shuzan Shonen once held up his *shippe* (a stick about one and a half feet long made of bamboo) to an assembly of disciples and declared: 'Call this a *shippe* and you assert; call it not a *shippe* and you negate. Now do not assert, nor negate, and what would you call it? Speak, speak!'"[162] And a second Zen master emphasized: "The true state is no state. The gate of *Dhamra* is no gate. Holy knowledge is no knowledge."[163] It is important to appreciate that in both of these instances the master was neither presenting information nor seeking it. Instead, on both occasions the Zen masters were actively seeking, through their strange, paradoxical, formulations, to induce a changed awareness among their disciples consistent with the fundamental tenets of Buddhist ontology—that is, the doctrine of *anātman* (no self), the essential theory of "dependent origination," and the foundational tenet that liberation is possible through the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. Their purpose was not to comment on the state of *anātman*, but to encourage it; not to speak of liberation, but to help in achieving it; not to speculate on *nirvāṇa*, but to assist others in becoming "nirvanaized."

The essential claim presented in the early canonical literature of Buddhism is that the Buddha did not reply directly to metaphysical inquiries and rejected the ontological claims of Hinduism (of Ātman and Brahman). This doctrine forms the basis for the Zen belief, which is central to the doctrine that underpins the Zen *kōan*, that *tathatā* (suchness) is "without words," that "suchness" is "transmitted outside the doctrine," and that "suchness" "does not set up letters," that is, it is inexpressible in words. It is the Buddha's insistence on the negation of self in the notion of no-self, combined with the claim that the nature of *satori*, *Wu*, or *nirvāṇa* cannot be put into words, that generates the following intriguing dialogue: "Tung-Shan asked Pen-Chi: 'What is your name, monk?' and received the reply, 'Pen-Chi.' 'Say something more,' said Tung-Shan. 'I won't.' 'Why not?' 'Because my name is not Pen-Chi.'"

In addition, there are the many Buddhist paradoxes that revolve around the category of desire: we must cultivate the desire to be free of desire as we desire to be liberated. And those that turn on the paradox of *nirvāṇa*—for example, the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaches:

> Thus, O Sariputa, all things, having the nature of emptiness, have no beginning and no ending. They are neither faultless nor not faultless; they are neither perfect nor imperfect. In emptiness there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no discrimination, no consciousness. There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no smell, no tastes, no touch, no mental process, no object, no knowledge, no ignorance. There are no Noble Fourfold Truths; no pain, no cause of pain, no cessation of pain, no Noble Path leading to the cessation of pain. There is no decay, and no death, and no destruction of the motion of decay and of death. There is no knowledge of Nirvāṇa, there is no obtaining of Nirvāṇa, there is no not obtaining of Nirvāṇa.[164]

And those that emerge from the report that the Buddha responded to the question of whether there is life after death, or whether death is annihilation, replied in the following way: "'The Perfect One exists after death,' this is not apposite; 'the Perfect One does not exist after death,' this also is not apposite; 'the Perfect One neither does nor does not exist after death,' this also is not apposite."

Then, again, there is Nāgārjuna's much admired, much copied employment of paradox. By pursuing the internal logic of the various interpretations of Buddhism encoded in the *Abhidharma*, especially those factors (*dharma*s), that relate to the analysis of existence and the notion of attributes, he showed each to be inconsistent, even nonsensical. It was against the background of this deconstructive effort that he was led to formulate his own views, especially those on *śūnyatā* (emptiness), in which he came to conclude: "The extreme limit (*koti*) of *nirvāṇa* is also the extreme limit of existence-influx (*saṃsāra*). There is not the slightest bit of difference between them."[165] To reach this challenging conclusion, he used contradictions and negative dialectics to disorient us, to confuse our awareness of how things are, and to free us from false notions of existence, so that we might be reoriented vis-à-vis reality, *satori*, *nirvāṇa*. In effect, paradox is used by Nāgārjuna to achieve a specific radical exegesis of Buddhism. (Parenthetically, I note that in the case of Nāgārjuna, as in the case of Śaṇkara, there is, despite early claims to the contrary in the Madhyamika school's account of its founder, no evidence that points directly to his having attained mystical enlightenment.)

The canonical literature of the Hindu tradition and its vast commentaries abound in paradoxes. The *Isā Upaniṣad* contends: "The One, the Self, though never stirring, is swifter than thought; . . . though standing still, it overtakes those who are running. . . . It stirs and it does not stir, it is far and likewise near. It is inside all this, and it is outside all this." The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* insists that Brahman "moves, it moves not, it is far and near, it is in, it is out." The *Kena Upaniṣad* concludes its epistemological reflections on Brahman with this wisdom: "He who knows not, knows; he who knows, knows not"[166]; "Other indeed, is it than the known, and moreover above the unknown" (167). (See also *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.7; *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.25.20; and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.3.) These paradoxes take us beyond partial, limited, "incorrect" ideas of the ultimate (*Brahman paramartha*) and help guide us to that higher level of insight (*prajña*)—which is the deepest meaning of the Upaniṣads—where corrupt and inadequate notions of self and other and of Self and Other are replaced by a more adequate wisdom.

Given that the objects/subjects of concern—that is, Ātman and Brahman—are altogether *un*like objects/subjects in the realm of the everyday, the language used to approach them must likewise be *un*like the language of the everyday. It is this assumption that leads to the introduction of paradoxes as a way of signaling that the referents of the language, to the degree that the discourse is, in any sense, referential, are metaphysically anomalous, or alternatively, that the language in play is not intended to be referential at all. In the Vedas and Upaniṣads the allusions to these ultimates are marked by paradoxical constructions precisely because the writers are aware of, and wish to make others aware of, this exceptional metaphysical-linguistic status. There is thus a particular and coherent logic to the functioning of paradoxes in the canonical sources of the Hindu tradition.

It should also be recalled that it was in commenting on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that Śaṅkara argued that the only correct way to characterize Brahman was *neti*, *neti*. The use of negation, and the related technique of double exclusion—"neither this nor that"—are seen by him as the most suitable means for pointing toward, not describing, the Ultimate. As a pradigmatic example of this hermeneutical position, take his dialectical commentary on the Gita's famous paradox: "The highest Brahman . . . is not being (*sat*), nor is it nonbeing (*asat*).

> OBJECTION: How can the "unknowable" be described as "neither being nor nonbeing?"
>
> REPLY: As he is inaccessible to speech, the knowable Brahman is defined in all the Upaniṣads just by the denial of all distinctions.
>
> OBJECTION: Only that which is spoken of as being can be said to exist. If the knower cannot be spoken of as "being" (or "existence"), then it cannot exist as knower . . .
>
> REPLY: But neither is it nonbeing, since it is not an object of our consciousness of non-existence.
>
> OBJECTION: But every state of consciousness is either consciousness of existence or non-existence. The "knowable" therefore . . .
>
> REPLY: Not so, for it is beyond the reach of the senses, and thus is not an object of consciousness accompanied with the idea of either being or nonbeing. . . . As such it can only be known through the means of knowledge called testimony; it cannot be, like a jar, an object of consciousness accompanied by the idea either of existence or nonexistence.[167]

Through this procedure of questions and answers, involving the refinement, but not the dissolution, of the nature of the original paradox of the Gītā, Śaṇkara—never making any positive assertions about "higher Brahman," and never predicating any attribute to Brahman—advances our understanding by a process of elimination and indirection, consistent with the logic of paradoxical utterances.[168] In the employment of this logical technique, he reminds one of Eckhart, though readers must take care not to push this comparison too hard or too far. That is, for Śaṇkara, as for Eckhart, the logic of negation contains, paradoxically, a capacity to inform, while, at the same time, it does not allow the accumulation or formation of propositional knowledge or the direct attribution of predicates to the Divine (Brahman). Put another way, negation serves as an apophatic indicator—that is, its denials affirm the reality of that which is beyond speech.

One final observation of these differing traditions, and these differing techniques that are related to the employment of paradoxes: paradoxical formulations are, by

design, intended to be logically indeterminate because they are employed in relationship to absolutes, the ultimate objects/subjects of mystical concern, which are, by definition, indeterminable. Paradoxes show this indeterminacy through their form, a form that finally has—on strict logical grounds—no content. But, at the same time, they do not become meaningless or wholly absurd, because they are utilized to express, to point toward, a truth that is revealed and confirmed normatively by revelation and scripture and they occur within a larger religious context in which all the negations and attributions, and the negations of attributions, and the attributions of negation receive meaning from the Weltanschauung that frames the entire, specific exegetical enterprise. So, for example, when Eckhart writes of a God who is not God, and the Word that is and is not God, and the Father who is and is not the Son, he is working from within a recognizably Christian Neoplatonic ontology that posits, a priori, a recognizably Christian trinitarian conception of God. Likewise, Nāgārjuna's dialectical negations that lead to an understanding of the doctrine of "dependent origination" (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and the related principle of *anicca* (impermanence) as equivalent to emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and again the radical paradoxical claim that "birth and death (*saṃsāra*) is identical in *nirvāṇa*," make some kind of sense because they presume and occur within a larger Buddhist context. In actuality, Nāgārjuna's comments on dependent origination, impermanence, and emptiness are best, and most fully, understood as commentaries on the Buddha's original teaching regarding *pratītya-samutpāda*. For this reason, no matter how complex, and sometimes apparently meaningless—because of its (il)logical turns—Nāgārjuna's thought possesses an overall coherence and intelligibility. He is, in effect, pushing Buddhist thought to its limits, but we can follow him because we understand the main structural claims of Buddhism that he shares and manipulates. Again, Saṅkara's *neti*, *neti* is a negation within the standing systematic theology of Hinduism. It is not just *neti*, *neti*, but "not this, not this" as *this* is conceptualized within the worldview of the Vedas and Upaniṣads. For this reason—that is, by virtue of this contextualization—the use of paradox by the world's mystics is more grounded than might appear to be the case.

### *Using Paradox to Hide Knowledge*

There is one additional distinctive, mystical use of paradoxes to which I should call attention. This involves consciously utilizing, and understanding, paradoxes and paradoxical formulations as ways of purposely hiding certain types of knowledge, while simultaneously indicating this fact by hinting at, but only hinting at, the existence of such "secrets." Perhaps the best-known description of this position is set out in the "Introduction" to Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, which exerted a wide influence among the later Jewish rationalists and kabbalists, especially Abraham Abulafia and Shem Tov ibn Gaon, and among Christian scholastics such as Aquinas and mystics such as Eckhart. As part of his exploration of biblical language, Maimonides provides "seven causes that should account for the contradictory and contrary statements to be found in any book or compilation." Regarding the last of the seven, he writes:

> The seventh cause. In speaking about very obscure matters, it is necessary to conceal some parts and disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another

> place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.[169]

Which is to say that, on at least certain occasions, the presence of contradictions-paradoxes does not prove a logical error or indicate the lack of conceptual power but is, rather, a sign intended to hint that the text that contains such constructions possesses deep spiritual resources not meant for everyone. Now, to the degree that we comprehend this function of contradictions-paradoxes, we generate yet another paradox. That is, while such formulations hide information, they also simultaneously, through the recognition of their distinctive form, reveal secrets, at least to the extent of calling the attention of the wise to the presence of esoteric doctrines in specific textual loci. This is most famously seen in a revised form in Nachmanides' biblical commentary wherein he does not publicly expose the putative core of the Torah and explicitly tells the general reader:

> Now behold I bring into a faithful covenant and give proper counsel to all who look into this book not to reason or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystic hints which I write regarding the hidden matters of the Torah, for I do hereby firmly make known to him [the reader] that my words will not be comprehended nor known at all by any reasoning or contemplation, excepting from the mouth of a wise Cabalist speaking into the ear of an understanding recipient. Reasoning about them is foolishness; and unrelated thought brings much damage and withholds the benefit. *Let him not trust in vanity, deceiving himself*, for these reasonings will bring him into nothing but evil as if they spoke falsely against G-d, which cannot be forgiven, as it is said, *The man that strayeth out of understanding shall rest in the congregation of the shades. Let them not break through unto the Eternal to gaze, for the Eternal our G-d is a devouring fire, even a G-d of jealousies*. And He will show those who are pleasing Him wonders from His Torah. Rather, let such see in our commentaries novel interpretations of the plain meanings of Scripture and Midrashim, and let them take moral instruction from the mouths of our holy Rabbis: "Into that which is beyond you, do not seek; into that which is more powerful than you, do not inquire; about that which is concealed from you, do not desire to know; about that which is hidden from you, do not ask. Contemplate that which is permitted to you, and engage not yourself in hidden things."[170]

Despite this warning, Nachmanides, when commenting on specific verses, many, though not all, of which are paradoxical or appear contradictory, gives his readers a clue as to which ones contain kabbalistic gnosis by remarking, "Ha-maven yaven" (Those who understand will understand). That is, while he does not reveal the actual nature of the encoded secrets, for they are not meant for the masses, readers should pay special attention to the verse under analysis, for its close study will reveal *chochmah nistarah*[171]—knowledge of the sefirothic realm and related theosophical wisdom. In this way the act of hiding also becomes, in part, an act of revealing.

Already in the *Celestial Harmony*, Pseudo-Dionysius had told his readers: "It is most fitting to the mysterious passages of scripture that the sacred and hidden truth about celestial intelligences be concealed through the inexpressible and the sacred and be inaccessible to the hoi polloi. Not everyone is sacred, and, as scripture says, knowledge is not for everyone."[172] Let these brief comments suffice—let readers take the hint that paradoxes are crucial indicators used to conceal, as well as to reveal, knowledge throughout the world's mystical literature.

*Alphabets and Numbers*

Many of the secrets of canonical texts are disclosed and retrieved through the application of intricate and unusual methods of numerical and letter permutation. Although it is not often discussed in the theoretical investigations of mystical phenomena that dominate the academic study of mysticism, the reality is that in at least certain major mystical traditions such exegetical techniques play an important role. The oldest tradition of this sort in the West is connected with Pythagoreanism and certain Neoplatonic teachers, including Plotinus. This practice was then adopted by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jewish thinkers began with three assumptions: (1) that God speaks Hebrew; (2) that the building blocks of the universe are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which God "spoke" in order to create the world; and (3) the letters, numbers, and sentences that God spoke in the process of creation are to be found in the Hebrew account of creation in Genesis. In consequence, the kabbalists held that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the numerical value of the letters, and the permutation of the letters (and, therefore, the words and sentences) contained and revealed elemental insights into the world above and the world below. Seen in this context, the *Sefer Yetzira*, for example, which was produced in the rabbinic era, should be considered, as its author intended it to be considered, a numerical-permutational commentary on Genesis 1—that is, an investigation of the mechanics by which God created the world. How, it asks, did God perform the wonder of creation through speech that is so simply and briefly described in Genesis? What did God say? What did He do? In answer to these primary queries, the *Sefer Yetzira* instructs its readers:

> 1. By means of thirty-two wonderful paths of wisdon, YH, YHVH of hosts, ELOHIM of Israel, Living ELOHIM, and Eternal King, EL SHADDAI, Merciful and Gracious, High and Uplifted, Who inhabits Eternity, exalted and holy is His Name, engraved. And He created His universe by three principles: by border and letter and number.
>
> Specifically as regard the letters of the Hebrew alphabet: 2. Twenty-two letters are the foundation: He engraved them, He hewed them out, He combined them, He weighed them, and He set them at opposites, and He formed through them everything that is destined to be formed.
>
> And these twenty-two letters then can be permutated and combined in a variety of ways: 4. And these twenty-two letters are the foundation: He set them in a wheel, like the kind of wall, with two hundred and thirty-one gates. And the wheel rotates forward and backward. And the sign of the thing is: there is no goodness above pleasure and there is no evil below pain
>
> 5. How did He combine them, weight them and set them at opposites? *Aleph* with all of them, and all of them with *Aleph*, *Bet* with all of them, and all of them with *Bet*. It rotates one turn, and thus they are in two hundred and thirty-one gates. And everything that is formed and everything that is spoken goes out from one term.[173]

Given the nature of this commentary, this mysterious doctrine of letters and numbers, and their myriad permutations, spawned a vast tradition of supercommentaries that continues into our own time.[174]

By the high medieval period, the notion that the creation account involved secrets necessarily linked to the Hebrew alphabet is widely attested. It is, therefore, well within the bounds of the tradition that the Zohar, in providing its theosophical rendition of Genesis 1, teaches:

> "At the beginning," said Rav Hammuna Sava, "we find the letters in reverse order. The letter *bet* comes first, and then *bet* comes first again, namely, *bereshit* and then *bara*. After this we have *alef* coming first, and then *alef* coming first again, namely, *elohim* and then *et*. What happened was that when the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to make the world, all the letters were sealed, and two thousand years before He created the world the Holy One, blessed be He, examined them and took delight in them. And when He wanted to create the world all the letters presented themselves to Him, from the end to the beginning."[175]

All the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are then described by the Zohar as to their esoteric significance, until the following:

> The letter *bet* entered. She said to Him: "Master of the world, may it be Your will to create the world through me, because it is through me that they bless You in the upper and lower worlds." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: "Yes, to be sure, I shall create the world through you, and you shall be at the forefront of the creation of the world." The letter *alef* arose, but did not enter. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: "*Alef*, *alef*, why do you not come into My presence like the other letters?" She said to Him: "Master of the world, since I have seen all the other letters leaving Your presence without success, what point is there? Moreover, You have given this great gift to the letter *bet*, and it would not be right for a king to take away a present that he has given to his servant and give it to someone else." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: "*Alef*, *alef*, although I shall create the world through the letter *bet*, you will be the first of all the letters. I have no unification except through you. All calculations and every deed in the world will begin with you. No unification will be effected except through the letter *alef*." The Holy One, blessed be He, made large letters above and small letters below. Hence, we have *bet, bet: bereshit barā: alef, alef: elohim et*—the letters above, and the letters below, and they were all as one from the upper world and from the lower world.[176]

Then, further developing this theme, our kabbalistic commentator explains that the sequence of forty-two letters that begins with the *bet* of the first word in the bible, *Bereshit*, and continues to the letter *bet* in the word *Bohu*, comprises God's secret, mystical name:

> Come and see. The world was engraved and established with forty-two letters, all of them a crown of the holy name. When they had become joined, they ascended by its letters to the realm above and then descended to the realm below. They were adorned with crowns in the four corners of the world, and (the world) was then able to survive. After this the letters went out and created the world above and below, the world of unification and the world of separation, and they are called "the mountains of Bether" (Song of Songs 2: 17), the mountains of separation, which are refreshed when the south side begins to draw near to them. Then the waters flow and, because of this force that flows above, everything rejoices. When thought arose in the joyful will of the mystery of mysteries a radiance came and flowed out of it, and they drew near to one another, and they have already explained it. These forty-two letters are a supernal mystery, and by them the upper world and the lower world were created, and they are the foundation and mystery of all the worlds. And concerning the fact that this is the mystery of the worlds, it is written, "The mystery of the Lord is for those that fear Him" (Psalm 25: 14). "And to make them known his covenant" (ibid.)—this is the mystery of the engraved letters (that stand out) revealed through their engraving.[177]

To know this name is a crucial matter that possesses, above all, theurgical significance, for it "is the foundation and mystery of all the worlds." Through the decipher-

ment of these alphabetical configurations, especially those connected with the names of God, as these are revealed in the Torah, the Kabbalist knows himself to be laying bare the secret ontological skeleton on which the worlds above and below are constructed.

The a priori theory of the Hebrew language that is operative in this context also lends itself to other forms of letter manipulation that are used in pursuit of the discovery of the inner meaning of the Torah. The sequence of letters, their frequency, their repetition, and their reversibility are all taken to convey esoteric information. For example, the three letters *nun*, *gimmel*, and *ayin* can spell words for either distress or joy, depending on the order in which they occur. Being aware of this, the mystics argue that if we keep the Sabbath properly—that is, arrange the letters (which represent, and bring into being, reality) properly, we have joy (spelled *ayin*, *nun*, *gimmel*); if not, we experience distress (spelled *nun*, *gimmel*, *ayin*). Again the place that a letter occupies in the alphabet carries theosophical import—for example, *alef*, the first letter, is taken to be connected with divinity while the last letter, *taf*, has negative connotations. As a consequence, these letters and those words that contain these letters have to be carefully searched to decipher the positive and negative secrets they reveal. Similarly, in a much utilized argument, the letters that make up the divine names, especially the Tetragrammaton, are said to carry special meaningfulness, as do the divine names as names.

Parallel techniques, now predicated on the transcendental status of Arabic, are employed in multiple ways in Islamic, especially Sufi, exegesis of the Qurʾān. Ibn ʿArabī, for example, offers this explanation of the meaning of the letters of Muhammad's name:

> The first *mim* is the head, and that is the world of the supreme Sovereignty (*'alam al-malakut al-a' la*) and of the Greatest Intellect (*al-'aqlal-akbar*). The breast and the arms are under the letter *h*, and this is the Glorious Throne; its numerical value is 8, which is the number of the angels who carry the Throne. The second *m* represents the stomach, and that is the World of the Kingdom (*'alam al-mulk*). The hips, the legs, and the feet are from the *d*, and that is the stable composition by means of the Eternal Writ.[178]

Ibn ʿArabī intends this decoding to be taken very seriously, even literally, and sees in such alphabetical deconstructions the essential means for getting closer to the mystical core of Islam. Moreover, his employment of such hermeneutical methods is not incidental to this larger theosophical message. Indeed, it is as a result of the repeated application of such a method—and related methods—that he is able to establish the building blocks that support his capacious cosmological and anthropological vision.

A second example: Farīddiddīn 'Aṭṭār explains the name Aḥmad, another of Muhammad's names, in relationship to the *hadīth qudsī*, *Anā Aḥmad bilā mīm* (I am Aḥmad without the m) esoterically as follows: "Aḥmad is the messenger of Ahad [the One, Allah] . . . [and when] the radiance of the light of manifestation becomes evident, the *m* of Aḥmad becomes invisible."[179] There is then only Allah. Annemarie Schimmel, tracing the fame and importance of this extra-Qurʾānic tradition, notes:

> Scarcely any other *hadīth qudsī* has been used so frequently in the Persianate parts of the Muslim world, even though it is not attested in the early collections of traditions and appears only in the twelfth century. It seems to prove that Aḥmad-Muhammad is separated from God only by a single letter, the *m*. In the Arabic numeric system this letter has the value of 40, the number of patience, maturing, suffering, preparation. (Israel was for

forty years in the desert; Jesus spent forty days in the desert; Muhammad was forty when his calling came; the forty days of Lent; the forty days of complete retirement as practiced by the Sufis, called *arbaʿin* or *chilla*; these and other similar customs and traditions in 1 8

In Jewish tradition such methods, and related ones, are called *gematria*, or *notrakon*. These forms of analysis turn on the numerical value ascribed to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; for example, *aleph* = 1, *bet* = 2, *gimmel* = 3. Given this alphetical sign-number link, words equal sums, and comparing the mathematical sum of a word (or letter) with other words (or letters) carries mystical import. So, for example, in searching out the meaning of the biblical phrase "Remember (*zachor*) the sabbath day, and hallow it," the mystics point out that the numerical value fo the word *zachor*, made up of the letters *zayin*, *chaf*, and *resh*, is 227, as is the numerical value of *berachah*, the Hebrew word for "blessing," made up of the letters *bet*, *resh*, *chaf*, and *hey*. This teaches that, given the mathematical equality, one who observes the Sabbath receives blessings. Again, in a more complicated play on numbers, the Hebrew letters that comprise the word for Satan, *ha-satan*, equal 364, which indicates that for 364 days of the year he causes problems for Israel and humankind, but that on the 365th day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, he is powerless against Israel's repentance and God's love.

Comparable and related numerical techniques are widely used in Pythagoreanism, Mithraism, and Zoroastrianism. For example, in Zoroastrianism, the number 7 represents the six *Amesha Spentas* (guiding spirits), and the high deity (*Ahura Mazda*), God of justice and goodness. In Sufi exegeses of the Qurʾān, in Christian mystical exegeses of the Hebrew Bible and of the Greek New Testament, and in Hindu interpretations of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, the numbers 3 and 7 are of special value. Taoist and Confucian traditions assign a role to the pentagram, with its putative connections to the five planets, the five directions, the five seasons, the number of sacred mountains, and the degrees of nobility. And Buddhist texts and traditions interpret the number 7 as a magical-mystical number, so the Buddha searches for salvation for seven years and circles the Bodhi tree seven times before meditating beneath it.[182] Nearly everywhere, then, numbers, particularly as employed in scriptural narratives, carry substantive mystical content.

## Conclusion

If one seeks to understand how mystical fellowships work and how individual mystics pursue their ambitious metaphysical goals,[183] then one not only has to concentrate attention on the rarified, and rare, moments of ecstasy, adhesion, supernal marriage, mindlessness, *satori*, *nirvāṇa*, and unity, but one also has to pay close attention to the sorts of exegetical techniques, and the ways of studying scripture, that are described in this essay. For the actual interpretation of sacred texts in these ways comprises a substantial part of what mystics actually do and plays a significant role in achieving those ultimate states of experience (and metaexperience) that mystics seek. It is therefore not surprising to find that the mystical exegesis of canonical texts constitutes a large, if not the largest, segment of what is usually identified as the collective body of the world's mystical literature.

The spatial constraints imposed upon an essay such as this forbid further exploration of the many additional important aspects related to the mystical exegesis of scripture. Among the relevant omissions, I think immediately of, for example, the not-yet-analyzed subjects of wordplay and the many ways in which changes of meaning take

place; the cardinal role of analogy and analogical meaning in mystical texts; and the profound connections that are yet to be explored between meditation, prayer, and scripture. But such investigations must wait for other occasions. Instead, I conclude by emphasizing that exegesis, as understood by the world's mystical communities, by the world's mystical personalities, is a way of learning theurgical practices that can influence God or the Ultimate; a primary form, a main channel, of mystical ascent; a basic source of spiritual energy; a performative mystical act with salient experiential—transformational—consequences; a way of defining one's mystical path; and a way to meet and interact with God or the Ultimate(s). To engage scripture, as the mystical adept engages it,[184] is not only to participate in an intense dialogue with texts but also, and far more important, to reach out to, and sometimes even to feel and to touch—if only, as John of the Cross describes it, through a "gentle breeze, that art so delicate and gentle—"[185] those powers that lie at their origin.

NOTES

1. See my earlier studies: "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in Seven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York, 1978), pp. 22–74; "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," in idem, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York, 1983), pp. 3–60; and "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," in idem, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York, 1992), pp. 3–41.
2. Cited in Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, 1997), p. 49.
3. Ibid. For more on the tradition of Sufi exegesis of the Qurʾān, see Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1968); Paul Nywa, *Exégèse coranique et language mysticque* (Beirut, 1970); Gerhard Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam; The Qurʾānic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl at-Tustarī* (Berlin, 1980); Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975); and the opening three chapters, especially the third, on "Traditional Esoteric Commentaries on the Quran," by Abdurrahman Habil in Seyyed Hussein Nasr (ed.), *Islamic Spirituality*, vol. 1: *Foundations* (New York, 1997).
4. For more on the study of grammar in the Hindu context, and on the interpretation of the work of grammarian as spiritual activity, see *The Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari with the Vṛtti*, trans. K. A. Suoramania Iyer (Poona, 1965 and 1971). Studies of this tradition include P. K. Chakravarti, *the Linguistic Speculations of the Hindus* (Calcutta, 1933); K. A. Subramania Iyer, *Bhartṛhari: A Study of the Vākyapadiya in the Light of Ancient Commentaries* (Poona, 1969); Harold K. Coward, *Bhartṛhari* (Boston, 1976); idem, *Sphota Theory of Language* (Columbia, Mo., 1980); and idem, "The Reflective Word" Spirituality in the Grammarian Tradition of India," in Krishna Sivardman, ed., *Hindu Spirituality: Vedas through Vedanta*, vol. 1 (New York, 1989), pp. 209-228.
5. Scholars have long debated which of the many (too many) works attributed to Śaṇkara are really his. Among those now generally agreed to be a authentic are the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*; the commentaries on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Taittīrya*, *Chāndogya, Aitareya*, *Iśā*, *Kaṭha*, *Kena* (two), *Muṇḍaka*, and *Praśna Upaniṣads*; the commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā*; the commentaries on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, with the *Gauḍapādiyakārikābhāsya* and the *Upadesāsahasrī*. All other works, including the many devotional hymns attributed to Śaṅkara, are probably writings of later authors.
6. For more on these works by Śaṅkara and his disciples, see Karl Potter, ed., *Advaita Vedanta up to Šamkara and His Pupils* (Princeton, 1981).

7. For more on the debate over Rāmānuja's authentic corpus, see John Carman's discussion of the issue on his *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Religious Understanding* (New Haven, 1974), pp. 49–64.
8. Both these authors and their work are discussed in Carman, *Theology of Rāmānuja*, pp. 225–230.
9. See, for further analysis, André Bareau, *Les premiers conciles bouddhiques* (Paris, 1955); and Jean Przyluski, *Le concile de Rajagrha* (Paris, 1926–1928).
10. For more on this literary and exegetical tradition, see K. R. Norman, *Pāli Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1983); Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, part 2 (London, 1962); S. N. Dube, *Cross Currents in Early Buddhism* (New Delhi, 1980); Etienne Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien* (Louvain, 1976); and G. C. Pande, *History of the Development of Buddhism* (Lucknow, 1962).
11. "The Sutras," in *Buddhist Spirituality*, vol. 1, edited by Takeuchi Yoshinori (New York, 1993), pp. 138–139.
12. I use these various locutions to be as inclusive as possible—that is, different traditions would describe the characterization of the ultimacy and authority of their canonical scriptures in different ways, given the larger ontology, the encompassing Weltanschauung, of which they are a part, but all would agree on the "fact" that their scriptures were the ultimate vis-à-vis their theological contexts.
13. *Didascalon*, book 5, chap. 10 (*Patrologia Latina*, Paris, 1844–1864), vol. 76, p. 698c. There is a more recent edition of this work, edited by Henty Buttimer, *Hugonis de Sancto Victore. Didascalion: De Studie Legendi* (Washington, D.C., 1939).
14. *Genesis Rabbah* 1.1.
15. *Zohar Chadash*, ad. loc.
16. *Jaiminya Upanīshad Brāhmana* 1.1–1.7, cited in Barbara A. Holdredge, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany, 1996), pp. 56–57.
17. Śaṇkara, *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* 1.3.28, cited in Holdredge, *Veda and Torah*, p. 126.
18. *Divine Names*, chap. 1, 588C.
19. Philo (of Alexandra), *De Migratione Abrahamie*, pp. 34–35. This, and all the other works of Philo cited in this essay, can be found in the Loeb Classical Library edition of Philo's corpus. I will refrain from providing individual citations for each text referred to or quoted.
20. Cited in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1: *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 61.
21. Meister Eckhart, *Liber Parabolarum Genesis*, in Josef Koch, ed., *Meister Eckhart, Die Deutschen und Latenischen Werke* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1936), vol. 1, pp. 453–454.
22. Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, trans. Herbert Mason (Princeton, 1982), vol. 3, p. 39.
23. In Iamblichus's *Life of Pythagoras*, Pythagoras is said to have spent time in the Land of Israel, though it is referred to as Syria, in the sense of Greater Syria, "consorting with the descendents of Mochos the prophet and philosopher." Mochos has been identified with Moses most recently in John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London, 1977) p. 143. A new English translation of Iamblichus's *Life* was published by Liverpool University Press (Liverpool, 1989). The reference to Mochos is found on p. 6. Porphyry, in his *Life of Pythagoras*, has Pythagoras learning Hebrew dream interpretation. See Porphyry, *Vie de Pythagore: Lettre à Marcella* (Paris: E. des Places, ed. and trans., Les belles lettres, 1982).
24. Albinus, *Didaskalikos*. In his discussion, Albinus repeats a theme that originated in Plato's *Republic*, esp. 7:52.

25. Holdredge, *Veda and Torah*, p. 357.
26. Ibn ʿArabī, as translated by William Chittick in his *Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination: The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, 1989), p. 239.
27. On this standard rabbinic description of the Torah, see, for example, *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, no. 306.
28. *Taittiriyia Samhita* 7., 3.1.4.
29. *The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-Neng*, trans. A. F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam (Boston, 1990), pp. 83 and 144.
30. I have dealt elsewhere with some interesting and unusual interpretive methods employed by mystics when they are deciphering canonical texts. For my earlier views, see S. T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning" and "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience."
31. Meister Eckhart, *Commentary on Exodus*, no. 211, in Josef Quint and Ernst Benz, eds., *Meister Eckhart, Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* [Kohlhammer, 1936], vol. 2, p. 178, cited in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Meister Eckhart, The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (New York, 1981), p. 28.
32. *Al Futûhât al-Makkayya* (Cairo, 1919), vol. 4, p. 25.
33. Qurʾān 5:66: "Had they performed the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have eaten both what was above them and what was beneath their feet."
34. Bede, cited in H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, p. 16.
35. There are well-known cases where individual mystics or mystical communities diverge from, or altogether reject, the moral norms of their larger, original community—for example, among the Sabbatians and Frankists, certain medieval Christian heretical groups, and tantric circles. However, in almost every case, this antinomian and "immoral" behavior is due to other beliefs held by the group—for example, messianic notions of a new age in which the "old law" and "old morality" are now overcome, rather than their mystical principles or experience as such. For more on the integral connection between ethics and mysticism in various traditions, see my two essays, "Ethics and Mysticism in Eastern Mystical Traditions" and "Ethics and Mysticism in Western Mystical Tradition," in, respectively, *Religious Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (June 1992), pp. 55–69 and vol. 28, no. 4 (September 1992), pp. 407–423.
36. I am indebted to Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 24–26, for this discussion of Eckhart's biblical exegesis.
37. *Al Futûhât al-Makkayya*, vol. 3, p. 158.
38. I note that Ewert Cousins quotes a slightly different version in his essay in this volume.
39. This is not to argue that moral readings are not to be found in the midrashic interpretations of the rabbinic era or in the medieval Jewish commentators, but to note that *derash*, as a full category, includes this type of exegesis and much more besides.
40. I am indebted to Frank Talmage's valuable essay "Apples of Gold; The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism," in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible to the Middle Ages* (New York, 1986), p. 319ff., for this nuance.
41. Augustine, *Confessions*, 12:18.27.
42. Gregory the Great, in 1 *Reg*, 1.78, cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York, 1994), p. 41.
43. For a full account of its Christian employ, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*. See also Bernard McGinn, *History of Christian Mysticism* (Grand Rapids, 1998); and Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La Théologie au douzième siecle* (Paris, 1957).
44. *Breviloquium*, prol., Q5, 201.

45. Ibn ʿArabī, cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 362.
46. *Midrash ha-Neelam, on Genesis* 1:3, in *Zohar Chadash* (Warsaw, 1885), p. 2.
47. Potter, ed., *Advaita Vedanta up to Samkara and His Pupils*, pp. 59–60.
48. An author whose biographical details and dates, and whose authorship of various works, are much in debate.
49. *Brahmasūtrabhāsya* 1.3.
50. Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (reprinted Berlin, 1985), Fragment 61.
51. See, for example, H. Diels (Berlin, 1903), *Fragmente*, 30D.
52. Plato, *Cratylus* 407A, *Republic* 378D, and elsewhere. For later criticism, see for example, Cicero, *de Natura deorum* and Sextus Empiricus, *adversus Mathematicos,* vol. 9.
53. Preceding him in this path were, for example, Pseudo-Aristeas and Aristobolous. For more on this Jewish Hellenistic tradition, see Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates* (New York, 1951); Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1974); Jacob Lauterbauch, "The Ancient Jewish Allegorists," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (NS), vol. 1 (1910–1911), pp. 291–333; and Joseph Bonsirven, *Exégèse Rabbinique et Exégèse Paulinienne* (Paris, 1939). One should also note that allegorical interpretation finds an important place in the Dead Sea Scrolls. See, for example, the *Habbakkuk Commentary* and the *Damascus Document* (also known as the *Zadokite Fragment*).
54. See, for example, Philo's *Quod Deus sit immutabilis*; De Confusione Linguarum, 1.405; *De Opificio Mundi* 1.38; *Legum Allegoriarum* 1.128; *De Josepho* 2.59.
55. Philo understands the need to affirm the literal-historical level of the text, particularly where biblical personalities—for example, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Samuel—are concerned. Thus, for example, in discussing the Patriarch Abraham, one of his favorite biblical characters, he takes pains to explain that both the literal and the allegorical readings of his travels are appropriate: "The migrations set forth by the literal text of the Scriptures are made by a man of wisdom, but according to the laws of allegory by a virtue-loving soul in its search for the true God." "I have employed both interpretations, the literal as applicable to man and the allegorical as applicable to the soul, and have shown both the man and the intellectual interpretation to be worth investigating" (*De Abrahama*, 68 and 88). In his exegesis of the lives of Joseph and Moses, he likewise gives due weight to the literal meaning of the biblical narrative (see *De Josepha* and *De Vita Moses*).
56. See, for example, Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C., 1982).
57. I have discussed the significance of the *Song of Songs*, in Jewish and Christian mystical traditions, in my essay "The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience," pp. 6–17.
58. *M. Yadaiim* 3.5; see also *T. B. Sanhedrin* 101A; and *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 3.10.
59. On Origen's commentary on the *Song of Songs* and its influence, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 20–48. On its relationship to earlier Jewish interpretations, see Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretation of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. 22 (1971), pp. 247–275, and Nicholas De Lange, *Origen and the Jews* (Cambridge, Eng., 1976).
60. *Commentary*, "Prologue," in W. Bachrens (ed.), *Origines Werke*, vol. 8, in *Die Griechishen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten drei Jahrhundert*, vol. 33 (Leipzig, 1901 ff.); there is also an English translation by R. P. Lawson, *Origen*. *The Song of Songs*. *Commentaries and Homilies* (New York, 1957), p. 61.

61. Cited in Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, p. 59.
62. Ibid., p. 60.
63. Ibid., p. 131.
64. Bernard, sermon 31, cited in Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, p. 129.
65. Ibid., pp. 128–129.
66. *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, cited in Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, p. 135.
67. In medieval Jewish tradition, too, this occurs both among mainline exegetes like Rashi and mystical adepts like Moses de Leon, author/redactor of the Zohar.
68. See, for example, the different interpretations of Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs* (New York, 1974); Marvin Pope, *The Song of Songs: A New Tradition with Introduction and Commentary*; Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, 1985); and Roland E. Murphy, "Canticle of Canticles," in R. E. Brown et al., eds., *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), pp. 506–510.
69. This is the translation of the traditional Hebrew phrase, *kivyachol* which is customarily attached to such blatant anthropomorphic language to indicate that it should not be taken simply at face value.
70. *A. T. Tafsir al Rabir*, ad loc.
71. A basic claim of Eckhart's ontology, set out especially in his *Opus Tripartitum* (Tripartite works).
72. Meister Eckhart, *Book of the Parables of Genesis*, chap. 1.9, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 96.
73. *In John*. 215. In Quint and Benz, *Meister Eckhart*, vol. 2, p. 354: "*Quod extra deum . . . nihil est nec est*."
74. *Sermon 48*. In Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 198.
75. As Eckhart's trial for heresy and excommunication indicates; for more on these events, see Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, introduction, pp. 10–15, and the sources on this matter in the accompanying notes.
76. Maimonides was not a mystic, despite later efforts by kabbalists to make him one. Nonetheless, his influence was so great that it was felt by Jewish mystics in a direct and powerful way. At the same time, he did believe in "secrets" being embedded in the Torah, especially in the "the account of the beginning" (*maʿaseh bereshith*) found in Genesis, and the vision of Ezekiel, "the account of the chariot" (*maʿaseh merkavah*), two biblical sources that had been central to Jewish mystical speculation from the rabbinic era onward. Even in the original Arabic version fo the *Guide for the Perplexed*, he refers to this esoteric material by the traditional Hebrew terms *sod* and *sithrey Torah*. In addition, he uses the Arabic terms *sirr* and *khafiyya* to indicate the notions of "secret" and "mystery." He also, complementarily, believed in a secret tradition of biblical interpretation that had been passed on by Moses to the intellectual elite of the Jewish people. See, for example, *Guide*, 1, 62, which refers to the tradition of "the men of knowledge" (in Shlomo Pines's English trans. [Chicago, 1963], p. 150). There is a tradition among the kabbalists that, late in his life, Maimonides realized the error of his rationalist ways and "converted" to a commitment to Kabbalah. This tradition is already found in R. Joseph ibn Shoshan's fourteenth-century *Commentary on Avot*, ed. M. Kasher and Yl Blacherowitz (Jerusalem, 1968), and in R. Shem Tob ben Abraham ibn Gaon's early-fourteenth-century commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, entitled *Migdal Oz*. By the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, this tale was widespread; see, for example, R. Elijah Gennazano's *Iggeret Hamudot*, published in London in 1912, Abrabanel's *Nahalat Avot* (New York, 1953), p. 209, and R. Meir ibn Gabbai's *Avodat ha-Kodesh* (Warsaw, 1883), p. 66. This tradition has

been critically studied by Gershom Scholem in his Hebrew essay "Mi-Hoker li-mekubbal," In *Tarbiz*, vol. 6 (1935), pp. 90–98; and in Michael A. Schmidman, "On Maimonides 'Conversion' to Kabbalah," in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 375–386. Maimonides also used the term *kabbala* in its earlier etymological sense of "received tradition"—that is, the authoritative interpretation of the Torah that has been handed down from Moses through the Prophets to the rabbinic sages. In this he was seconded by the Sufi tradition that held that Muhammad had passed on the correct mystical interpretation of the Qurʾān to ʿAli. The Sufis called this tradition *naql*, a term also used by Maimonides in the original Arabic version of the *Guide*, I.5 and I.62.

77. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964), p. 2.
78. See, for more on this issue, M. D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago, 1968), esp. p. 131.
79. I have discussed this hermeneutical strategy at some length in my *Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York, 1994), pp. 237–240; the discussion there contains an extensive bibliography.
80. Bruno of Segni, *In Genesis*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 164:205C, cited in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, p. 424, n. 26.
81. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 167:1473D, cited in H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, p. 424 n. 27.
82. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 177:957A, cited in H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, p. 425 n. 31.
83. Remi of Auxere, *Enarrationes in Psalmos 41*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 131:393B, cited from H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, p. 427, n. 66.
84. *Midrash ha-Neʿelam, Zohar Chadash*, 83A; my translation.
85. *Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkunim* 94A; my translation.
86. Zohar 2, 85B, cited in Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford, 1989), vol. 3, p. 158; see his entire analysis of this issue, pp. 1155–1167. And consult also Daniel Matt, "The Mystic and the Mitzvot," in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality* (New York, 1986), vol. 1, pp. 367–404.
87. Zohar 3, 38B, cited in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, p. 1160.
88. Zohar 2, 153B.
89. Zohar 3, 113A, cited in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, p. 1160.
90. Cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York, 1994), p. 109.
91. *Prayers and Mediations of Saint Anselm* (New York, 1973), p. 95.
92. Ibid., p. 96.
93. Cited in Ewert Cousins, "The Humanity and Passion of Christ," in Bernard McGinn, et al., eds., *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York, 1987), vol. 2, p. 378.
94. Though this work has been linked to Bonaventure as its author, this attribution is almost certainly incorrect.
95. Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Soul Into God*, "Prologue." For an English version of this work, see the translation by Ewert Cousins (New York, 1978), p. 383.
96. The details of the historical incarnation are seen clearly, for example, in Suso's *Buchlein der ewigen Weisheit* (Little book of eternal wisdom) of c. 1330 (translated into Latin as *Horologium Sapientae*). In setting out the "hundred meditations and petitions . . . which could be devoutly pronounced each day," he begins with this list of ten torments and indignities the historic Jesus suffered leading up to the crucifixion: "1. Ah, Eternal Wisdom, my heart reminds you how, after the Last Supper, you went to the mountain and were covered by a bloody sweat because of the anguish of your

loving heart. 2. And how you were captured by your enemies, roughly bound, and wretchedly led away. 3. Lord, how you were shamefully treated during the night, cruelly scourged, spat upon, and suffered your fair eyes to be blindfolded. 4. Early in the morning, you were condemned by Caiphas and delivered to death. 5. Your mother looked at you with boundless grief. 6. You were ignominiously brought before Pilate, falsely accused, and condemned to death. 7. You, Eternal Wisdom, clothed in white garments, were mocked as a fool before Herod. 8. Your comely body was cruelly disfigured and bruised by the savage lashes of the scourge. 9. Your tender head was pierced by sharp thorns, so that your loving face was covered in blood. 10. Thus condemned, you were miserably and shamefully led out to your death, bearing your own cross." And he then elaborates upon twenty items connected with the crucifixion. "1. Beloved Lord, on the high branch of the cross your clear eyes were dimmed, distorted. 2. Your divine ears were filled with mockery and insult. 3. Your refined sense of smell was offended with an evil stench. 4. Your sweet mouth was offended by a bitter potion. 5. Your delicate sense of touch was offended by hard blows. 6. Gentle Lord, your divine head was bowed down by pain and anguish. 7. Your lovely throat was rudely struck. 8. Your pure face was covered with spittle and blood. 9. Your clear complexion was pallid. 10. Your entire fair body was benumbed. 11. Beloved Lord, your right hand was pierced by the nail. 12. Your left hand was transfixed. 13. Your right arm was stretched out. 14. Your left arm was painfully dislocated. 15. Your right foot was dug through. 16. Your left foot was savagely torn. 17. You hung there helpless. 18. Your divine legs were extremely fatigued. 19. All your sensitive members were immovably riveted to the narrow halter of the cross. 20. Your body was bathed in hot blood." The mystical meditations that then follow these remembrances of the actuality of Jesus' suffering and death are predicated on the historical suffering of Jesus in his humanity. The flesh, Jesus' flesh, is not incidental to, or irrelevant for, authentic and profound Christian faith. Indeed such faith is impossible without it.

97. Tauler—contrary to the contemporary elevation of Eckhart, who was Tauler's teacher and main inspiration—was the mystic most read and the emulated in Germany over the centuries. Eckhart's extreme doctrines of detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and of self-abandonment (*Gelassenheit*) that led to his papal condemnation by Pope John Paul XXII, in 1329, caused others to shy away from his doctrines, though, of course, he continued to be read—even if he was not always cited by name—and to exert a significant influence on the development of late medieval and early modern Christian mysticism.
98. Johannes Tauler, *Dies Predigten Taulers* (Zurich, 1968).
99. See, for example, Alfred of Rievaux's *De Iesu puero duodenni* (Jesus at the age of twelve) in Anselm Hoste and Charles Talbot, eds., *Aelredi Rievallensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, *Opera Ascetica* (Turnhout, 1971).
100. *Periphyseon* 953D, trans. J. P. Sheldom Williams (Washington, D.C., 1987).
101. Sermon 55, *Johannes Tauler*, *Sermons*, trans. Maria Shrady (New York, 1985), p. 158.
102. The dark side of this doctrine is evidenced most clearly in the medieval tradition of accusations that Jews, in particular, stole the wafers from the church in order to repeat the crucifixion. The first recorded instance in which the charge was leveled occurred in Belitz, Germany, in 1234, when a number of Jews were tried and burned at the stake. For more details on this accusation, consult Marie Despina, "Les accusations de profanation d'hosties portees contre les juifs," *Recontre*, vol. 5, nos. 22, 23 (1971), pp. 150–173, 180–196; and J. Stengers, *Les juifs dans le Pays-Bas au Moyen-Age* (Brussels, 1950). For further analysis, see Gavin Langmuir's two essays, "The

Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln," in *Speculum* 47 (1972), pp. 459–482, and "L'absence d'accusation de meurtre rituel a l'ouest du Rhone," in *Juifs et judaisme de Languedoc, XIII siècle et au début XIV siècle*, *Cahiers de Fanjeaux*, vol. 12, (Toulouse, 1977), pp. 235–249.

103. The learned analyses and speculations of the later medieval works on the *quadriformis species sacramentorum* (the fourfold form/sense of the sacraments) also provide data that are relevant to a full discussion of the medieval notion of a symbol.
104. For details of the speculations about Maṇḍana Miśra's biographical details, see Potter, ed., *Advaita Vedanta up to Śaṃkara and His Pupils*, pp. 346–347.
105. This summary is quoted from Potter, *Advaita Vedanta*, p. 370.
106. See my comments on the role and meaning of mantras in my essay "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," pp. 10–12.
107. The disproportionate prominence in the description and analysis of Sufism that is given to those masters who represent exceptions to this rule, especially that represented by the very greatest Sufi theosophist, Ibn ʿArabī, provides a distorted image of the character of the Sufi literary tradition in its totality.
108. M. D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, p. 103.
109. Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, trans. H. E. Butler (London, 1953), vol. 8, sec. 23.
110. Isaiah 11:11–15.
111. *Tanchuma, Lech Lecha*, 9.
112. Nachmanides' comment on this teaching is offered in his *Commentary on the Torah*, Genesis, 12:6. I cite the English translation by Charles B. Chavel, *Ramban Commentary on the Torah*, Genesis 12.6, (New York, 1971), pp. 168–169.
113. See, for example, Mark 1:1–13; 1 Cor. 15–21 and 44–49.
114. See, for example, Epis. to Hebrews 11:17–19.
115. Consider, for example, Matthew's account of the sermon on the mount, Matt. 5, cf. Exod. 20. See also, Matt. 8:23–27, 9–13, and 11:4–6.
116. See, for example, 1 Cor. 1:2, which marked the comparison to crossing the Red Sea. Also, see Acts 7.
117. See, for example, Matt. 4:1; and Heb. 3 and 4.
118. Cited in Geoffrey W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (London, 1957), p. 13.
119. Jerome, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 11.21–3.
120. Cited from Jean Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Typology of the Fathers* (London, 1960), p. 11.
121. *Sifre*, Number 69, This will be found on p. 65 in the Horovitz edition of this midrash, which has been reprinted many times.
122. See, for example, *Mechilta de R. Ishmael, Baḥodesh* 9. This will be found in vol. 2, p. 268, of Jacob Z. Lauterbach's edition of this work (Philadelphia, 1933–1935).
123. See, for example, Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Daniel 2:39.
124. Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah*, trans. Chavel, p. 394.
125. Ibid., p. 398.
126. F. Talmage, "Apples of Gold," p. 314.
127. *Zohar*, *Vayera*, 110B–111A. *Zohar*, trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon (London, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 350–351.
128. Tauler puts this well in sermon 29: "When we come to speak of the Most Blessed Trinity, we are at a loss for words, and yet words must be used to say something of this sublime and ineffable Trinity. To express it adequately is as impossible as touching the sky with one's head. For everything we can say or think can no more ap-

proach the reality than the smallest point of a needle can contain Heaven and earth; indeed, a hundred, a thousand times, and immeasurably less than that.

It is utterly impossible for our intellect to understand how the lofty, essential Unity can be single in essence and yet threefold in Persons; how the Persons are distinct from each other; how the Father begets the Son; how the Son proceeds from the Father and yet remains within Him (by comprehending Himself the Father utters His Eternal Word); how from this comprehension that proceeds from Him, there streams forth an ineffable love, which is the Holy Spirit; and how these wondrous Processions stream back again in essential unity, in ineffable self-delight and self-enjoyment; how the Son is equal to the Father in power, wisdom, and love; how the Son and the Holy Spirit are also one. And yet there is an inexpressibly vast distinction between the Persons, although they proceed in an ineffable way in unity of nature. On this subject a staggering amount of things could be said, and yet nothing would have been said to convey how the supreme, superabundant Unity unfolds into Trinity."

129. There are many logical problems with this position that I will not discuss here. For an introduction to some of these difficulties, consult my essays, "The Language and Logic of 'Mystery' in Christology," in John Clayton and Stephen Sykes, eds., *Christ, Faith and History* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 239–262; and "Utterance and Ineffability in Jewish Neoplatonism," in Lenn Goodman, ed., *Jewish Neoplatonism* (Albany, 1992), pp. 279–298.
130. Erigena, *Periphyseon* 1 (462D), cited in B. McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, p. 98.
131. *Mystical Theology* chap. 1, 998B–1000A. A full translation can be found in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York, 1987), p. 135.
132. One must not make the logical error of concluding, from these comparative data, that this use of paradoxical formulations in many different mystical traditions entails that the mystical experiences sought and had in the different traditions are the same. For more on this consequential error, see my remarks in "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," pp. 54–57. It must also be recognized that *parallel* does not always mean "equivalent" and that differences within specific Eastern traditions—for example, that are represented by Zen—are not to be too easily overlooked or diminished.
133. *Deutsche Werke* 2, 486–506, sermon 52.
134. F. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 163.
135. *PR* 53, *Deutsche Werke* 2, 529, 3–7, cited in F. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 164.
136. *PR* 62, *Deutsche Werke* 3, 66,4, cited in F. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 165.
137. *PR* 30, *Deutsche Werke* 2, 94, 4–5, cited in F. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 166.
138. *PR* 30, *Deutsche Werke* 2, 94, 6–7, cited in F. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 166.
139. As suggested by Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart, Analogie, Univozität und Einheit* (Hamburg, 1963), p. 69.
140. *Patrologia Latina* 83, *Deutsche Werke* 3, 438, 1, cited in F. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 166.
141. Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten und Tractate*, ed. and trans. Josef Quint (Munich, 1955), p. 430.
142. I use this term in its Kantian sense, referring to space, time, and causality.
143. *Commentarius ad Wisdom* in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 82, p. 490.
144. Eckhart, *Ave, gratia plena*, *Deutsche Werke*, vol. 1, 376–377.
145. Isaac of Stella, sermon 22:5, cited in McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, p. 292.
146. Isaac of Stella, sermon 22.10, cited in (McGinn) ibid., p. 292.
147. Isaac of Stella, sermon 22.12, cited in (McGinn) ibid., pp. 292–293.

148. For more on this, see McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, p. 410.
149. Cited in Saskia Murk-Jansen, "Hadewijch and Eckhart: Amor Intellegere est," in Bernard McGinn, ed., *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics* (New York, 1994), p. 22.
150. *Mechthild of Magdeburg*, ed. Hans Neumann (Munich, 1990), vol. 3, pp. 65–68.
151. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 107.
152. "Sermon II on the Feat of the Blessed Trinity," in *Johannes Tauler Sermons*, p. 103.
153. See Tauler's poems (or pseudo-Tauler's?) in Laurentio Surius, ed., *Institutiones Taulerianae* (Cologne, 1548).
154. *John of the Cross, Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (New York, 1987), p. 100.
155. *Entrème,* in *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C., 1973), p. 709.
156. *The Living Flame of Love*, vol. 1, p. 6, in *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, ed. Kavanaugh, p. 296.
157. Abdel Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junayd* (London, 1962), p. 57 (in Arabic). In an earlier work, Abu Bakr Kalabadi attributes this saying to Du'l-Nun, *Kitab al-ta'arrof*, ed. A. J. Arberry (Cairo, 1933), p. 105.
158. *Kitab al-Mithaq*, cited in Michael Sells, "Bewildered Tongue: The Semantics of Mystical Union in Islam," in Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith* (New York, 1989), p. 109.
159. *Kitab al-Tawasin*, ed. Louis Massignon (Paris, 1913), p. 45, no. 12.
160. *Rasa'il, Kitab a-Isra*, cited in Michael Sells, "Bewildered Tongue: The Semantics of Mystical Union in Islam," p. 107.
161. Michael Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without a Shore* (Albany, 1993), p. 43.
162. Cited in Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York, 1964), p. 66.
163. Cited in Junjiro Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu, 1949), p. 163.
164. John Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mysticism* (New York, 1977), p. 139.
165. *Mulamadhyami Kakarikas*, cited in Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville, 1967), pp. 216–217.
166. *Kena Upaniṣad* 1, 2, 3.
167. Eric Lott, *Vedantic Approaches to God* (London, 1980), p. 72.
168. I note that in Jainism, too, the ineffable, *avaktavya*, is indicated by contradictory affirmations—that is, saying "yes" and "no" about *X* simultaneously. For more on the subtleties of the Jain position, see Bimal Matilal, *The Central Philosophy of Jainism* (*Anekantavala*), (Ahmadabad, 1981).
169. *Guide for the Perplexed*, "Introduction," trans. S. Pines, p. 18.
170. Nachmanides' *Commentary on The Torah*, trans. C. Chavel, p. 16.
171. Nachmanides' *Commentary on The Torah*, trans. C. Chavel, p. 15, and see his explanation, p. 15 n. 58.
172. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Harmony*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Leubheid, p. 149.
173. *Sefer Yetzira*, quoted from the English translation by David Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1978), vol. 1, p. 15, Mishnah 1, and Mishnah 2, 4, and 5, pp. 21–31, 34–41.
174. See, for example, Aryeh Kaplan's translation and commentary, *Sefer Yetzirah* (York Beach, Maine, 1990); and Leonard R. Glotzer, *The Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism: The Book of Creation and Its Commentaries* (Northvale, N.J., 1992). The ear-

lier commentary tradition on this work includes the efforts of such luminaries as Saadya Gaon (tenth century), R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres (thirteenth century)—though there are grounds for doubting the attribution of the work that usually is assigned to him, Nachmanides (thirteenth century), and R. Elijah of Vilna (the Vilna Gaon) (eighteenth century).

175. This is the English translation provided by D. Goldstein in the English edition of I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 2, p. 562.
176. Ibid., pp. 566–567.
177. Ibid., p. 561.
178. Cited in Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, 1985), p. 115.
179. Cited in ibid., p. 116.
180. Ibid., p. 117.
181. *The Mystery of Numbers* (New York, 1993), pp. 21–22.
182. For further details on various numerological notions and usages, see A. Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, which includes a helpful bibliography for further study.
183. One might wish to substitute other terms for *metaphysical*, varying from tradition to tradition.
184. Though I use the singular terms *scripture*, *adept*, and *it* for reasons of style, it should be understood that I mean to refer to the wide variety of the world's scriptures, to the many sorts of mystical adepts, and that "it" is a reference to the plurality of sacred texts in the differing world's religions and mystical communities.
185. *The Living Flame of Love* (Garden City, N.Y., 1962), p. 47, n. 16.